

Text: Philippians 3:15 – 4:1

Title: A Deep Longing

Date: 02.28.10

Roger Allen Nelson

Lew Smedes ~ ethics professor, author, reformed gadfly ~ would routinely ask a class of first year students if they believed in heaven and hands would shoot up all around the room. He would follow by asking who wanted to go to heaven. Again, hands would be raised around the room. Then, with everyone's hand in the air he would ask, "Be honest, now ~ who would like to go to heaven today, before the sun sets." And, hands would flutter, falter, and fall. Students would look sheepishly at one another. A few kept their hands up, as if they thought it was the right answer, but most wanted a rain check. Most believed in heaven, but heaven could wait.

Then, Smedes would ask if they would like to see the world set straight on its hinges, for once and forever ~ No more common colds, no more uncommon cancers,  
no hunger, no homelessness, no hate,  
no one would raise even a finger against another,  
no war, no earthquakes, no terrorism, no disease.  
There would be peace ~ even peace with ourselves. ...

Smedes would then ask if they were ready for that.

I don't know what his next point was. My guess is that he was trying to get students to think differently about the nature of heaven. Maybe he was trying to counter the prevailing idea that heaven is like an eternal weekend in Palm Springs ~ puttering around on golf carts while elevator-praise-music fills the air. Or, maybe he was hoping to dissuade the student who remembers a Sunday school teacher telling them that they better quit screwing around and sing better because they needed to be ready for heaven.

I don't know what his next point was. I do know that we have a variety of ideas about heaven. I do know that some take great comfort in the hope of heaven and others are remarkably skeptical and indifferent....

Well, this morning, as we are considering the contours of a Lenten spirituality, I invite you to measure heaven.

What is a reformed/biblical spirituality with the glow of heaven in the offing?

Is all of this simply a test or a precursor for all of that?

How does the hope of heaven inform our spirituality?

We began on Ash Wednesday with the reminder that we are dust and to dust we return. We began with the reminder that we are all going to die. No one gets out of here alive.

The earth shrugs and thousands upon thousands die in Haiti or Chile.

After 96 years, Ruth Pelaski breathes her last with her daughter holding her hand.

A whale grabs hold of a trainer's pony tail and drags her under.

A six year old girl is hit by a drunk driver as she crosses Ashland and 74<sup>th</sup>.....

We are all going to die. A Lenten spirituality begins with that cold hard truth.  
But, God calls! (Lent One). To borrow language from last week:

While we were still indifferent,  
while we were still standing in line at the cafeteria,  
while we were still dabbling and doubting and distant,  
while we were still dusty,  
while we were still dead....  
God called in Jesus Christ.

And maybe that's it.

We're all going to die, but God calls us in Jesus Christ, and we go to heaven....

*Some bright morning when this life is o'er  
I'll fly away, to that home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.*

*I'll fly away, oh Glory, I'll fly away  
In the morning when I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.*

*When the shadows of this life have gone I'll fly away  
Like a bird from these prison walls I'll fly, I'll fly away*

You get the point. In Christ, God defeats sin and overcomes death. There is nothing to fear. All who are called ~ are going home to heaven. Thanks be to God!

That is what Paul writes ~ isn't it?

*Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame.  
Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await  
a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring  
everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his  
glorious body.*

You know, "our citizenship is in heaven" is a curious little phrase. Paul uses it earlier in this letter to the church in Philippi when he writes:

*Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

The word translated as "citizen" or "citizenship" has the sense of being part of a commonwealth. It is communal; it is political; it is located in relation to others. So, to the Philippians this would be heard in stark contrast to their participation in the Roman Empire. They already understood themselves as citizens of the empire and Caesar was lord, but Paul announces that they are also citizens of the commonwealth of heaven.

They are members of a different kingdom.

They have different allegiances.

They have a different a culture, different customs, different ways of being...

They have a different lord.

Gerald Hawthorne puts it this way:

*As a colony of heaven Christians stand in contrast with the Jews. Often the Jews were allowed by the Roman government to form little enclaves, colonies of Jerusalem, so to speak, to keep their own traditions and obey their own laws. But for Paul their colonies were strictly earthbound and time-bound, because they were made up of people whose minds were entirely fixed on earthly matters. Fastening on the present, living for the now, they looked for nothing beyond today. But Christians lived in eager expectation of the future. They have a persistent yearning, a joyful anticipation of a coming day...*

So, maybe dear friends ~ a Lenten spirituality is marked by a citizenship in heaven.

That is to say that it is communal. It is not about lone rangers and singular souls that fly away to heaven. But, it is about a body politic ~ a commonwealth.

That is to say that it is in tension with other claims. We are “resident aliens.” We live and are shaped by a different sense of identity. We would embody an alternative to the empire.

But, maybe a third quality to this citizenship is a deep longing. A deep longing for a different reality....

I find it striking that there is really very little in the Bible about heaven ~ as that place where we go to after we die. But, there is a great deal about the culmination of creation. There is a great deal about some last day, some end time, some day when from a heaven:

*a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

So, in some ways the story of scripture is not that we go to heaven, but that heaven comes to us. Our hope is not about what happens to our souls after we die, but about what happens in God’s great creation reclamation project. To quote Neil Plantinga:

*Biblical hope has a wide angle lens. It takes in whole nations and peoples. It brings into focus the entire created order ~ wolves and lambs, mountains and plains, rivers and valleys. When it is widest and longest, biblical hope looks forward toward a whole “new heaven and new earth,” in which death, mourning, and pain have passed away, and....*

And the very hand of God wipes away the last tear.

As that is true then a Lenten spirituality is shaped not only by an awareness of our limitations ~ our death; and it is not only by God’s call and our response; but it is also shaped by a deep deep longing for *shalom*, for that day when heaven comes to earth, when thy kingdom comes, and when the dwelling of God is with people....

That is not to tarnish the hope of heaven. There is language and imagery in scripture about some home-going rest after death. But, it is to recognize that the direction of all history is ultimately to *shalom*. And, that despite what it might feel like today, and despite the unspeakable horrors of this world, and despite bellies full of our own shame, there will come day when this world will be renewed, restored, redeemed, reconciled, reclaimed, and resurrected.....

And everything will be brought under Christ,  
and our lowly bodies will be made glorious.  
And, therefore Paul encourages the Philippians to stand firm.

We are not longing for an escape.  
We are not waiting to be whisked away.  
We are not bidding time for a room in a mansion.  
We are not just passing through.

But, we are a commonwealth of heaven, a colony of a coming kingdom, living in the light of that reality, and knowing a deep longing for God's *shalom*. Therefore we are free to live by that eschatological hope in seeking justice,  
by pursuing peace,  
by welcoming the stranger,  
by loving our enemy,  
by forgiving without needing to get the last word....

There is a beautiful song by Bruce Springsteen entitled "Across the Border." It is hushed guitar, accordion, violin. It imagines a young couple trying to cross over to a better life. There is a living hope and a deep longing for *shalom*. The imagery is true for a Lenten spirituality ~ for those who once were dead, but who are called by God in Christ.

*Tonight my bags are packed, tomorrow I'll walk these tracks  
That'll lead me across the border  
Tomorrow my love and I, will sleep 'neath auburn skies,  
Somewhere across the border*

*We'll leave behind my dear the pain and sadness we found here  
And we'll drink from Bravo's muddy waters  
Where the sky grows grey and wide, we'll meet on the other side,  
There across the border*

*For you I'll build a house, high upon a grassy hill, somewhere across the border  
Where pain and memory, pain and memory have been stilled, there across the border*

*And sweet blossoms fill the air, pastures of gold and green  
Roll down into cool clear waters,  
And in your arms 'neath open skies, I'll kiss the sorrow from your eyes  
There across the border.*

*Tonight we'll sing the songs and I'll dream of you, my corazon  
And tomorrow my heart will be strong;*

*And may the saints' blessings and grace, carry me safely to your arms  
There across the border.*

*For what are we without hope in our hearts  
That someday we'll drink from God's blessed waters  
And eat the fruit from the vines, I know love and fortune will be mine  
Somewhere across the border*

Thanks be to God.

Even so, Come Lord Jesus.

Amen.