

“Looking Forward”

I Corinthians 2:1-11

Remember Murphy’s Law: you know, “If anything can go wrong, it will?” I was reading some of the corollaries to Murphy this week. Here’s a couple. “If nothing can go wrong, it will anyway.” “The other line always moves faster.” Here’s a clincher, “Church furnaces and air conditioning rest on Sunday.”

There was a joke going around sometime back that attempted to illustrate a Murphy principle. A man is crawling across a desert in a desperate search of water. Suddenly a necktie salesman appears in front of him wanting to know if he’d like to buy a tie. Of course, the man is desperate for only water, and tells the salesman so. So, the necktie salesman just leaves the man there to continue his search for water. Then, low and behold, a beautiful restaurant appears in the distance; out there in the middle of nowhere. Crawling up to it, the man realizes that it’s not a mirage. Reaching the door, he calls out to the maître d’, “Please, I need a glass of water!” To which the maître d’ replies, “Sir, gentlemen are not served without a necktie.”

OK, I’ve had days like that. You, no doubt, have too. It’s just for such days that our Epistle lesson this morning, from the words of Paul to the Corinthians, can really be restoring. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him...” Despite everything that may assure us that this life will always turn out like a Murphy’s Law corollary, our passage is saying, “No! There is something coming, beyond our imaginations to comprehend, something so amazing that it will stifle Murphy once and for all; something our God holds for you and me. So, what is Paul writing about? He’s quoting from the vision of the Prophet Isaiah where God declares that there is coming a new heaven and new earth, where “No one will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain!” This thing that is

coming is Heaven. Now, on this Annual Meeting Sunday, why on earth would I bring up Heaven? I'll get to that.

But first, let's look forward for a moment toward Heaven, and let's begin that looking by considering this first thing Paul and Isaiah are telling us about it: We can't even imagine Heaven! That's right!

Everything we say about it, or compare it to, is less than it actually is. All the wondrous things of this world are only metaphors and hints to what is to come. The reason we have difficulty imagining what Heaven is like is that our minds are seldom able to create something completely new and different from what we have already experienced. We find ourselves compelled to appropriate the most beautiful of this world we already inhabit.

That reliance on metaphor and likeness is not all that bad though. Consider: a drive in the mountains, or a stop by the ocean, or gazing upon a dew-covered flower as it lifts its colorful face toward the sun; how much more majestic could Heaven be? D'aun and I once saw a little church in Ireland. It has beautiful stained-glass windows. The richness of the reds and blues is breathtaking. It has one particular window, however, that has been left in clear glass. It is perhaps the most beautiful window of them all. It frames an outdoor panorama that includes a clear, azure-blue lake and emerald-green rolling hills. Under the window is this verse from the Psalm: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows forth his handiwork."

It reminds me of the writings of Dorothy Gardner in her book, Eastward In Eden. She writes, "Sometimes, when I am working in my garden, when the day is hot and still, I am transported to another world. The hum of bees seems like singing wires from Eternity. It is as though a message were trying to come through, and I know what it means, but I can't hear the words...I like to think my garden is Eden, but I know it is only evidence of Eden."

That's the truth of it: the wonders of the Creation are only evidences of Heaven. The beauty and glory of this world are but a foretaste of the wondrous things that await us. The love of our family and friends is but a hint of the love God has for us. The most beautiful music of this world will not hold a note to the music of Heaven's choir. Everything we count in this world as wondrous, is, at best, a lesser reflection. If you marvel at the wonder of this world, just wait until you behold the world to come. That is the first thing Paul and Isaiah are telling us this morning. All the wonders of this world are only metaphors and hints for what is coming. We can't even imagine it. But, we shouldn't stop trying.

And that leads us to the other point Paul and Isaiah are making this morning: looking ahead changes the wrongs of the here and now. Yes, I know! It hasn't always been the case that looking ahead to Heaven has brought out the best in God's people here and now. Dictators, Monarchs, autocrats, and other oppressors have all used the visions of what is to come, as a way to make the folks they are grinding down just look to the future and be content for now. That is what led Carl Marx to famously label all religion as, "the Opiate of the People!" Because of this history, being Heavenly minded has a bad rap in our day.

It reminds me of something that Miss Sadie used to say. Miss Sadie was a chief cook in the kitchens of the Princeton Seminary Student Union. I was the crew chief for the student dish crew. As you might imagine, given that nearly a thousand students were fed there every day, a lot of meals went out and a lot of dirty dishes came back in. My job, as the dish crew chief, was to keep the crew efficiently moving everything in coordination toward a successful state of cleanliness. It wasn't bad, once you got into the rhythm: just enough concentration was required on the work that we were forced to stop thinking of all the academic demands on us. It was freeing mentally; we were free enough, in fact, to get into a bit of a relaxing, meditative, mode. The problems would occur when one of the crew would get a bit too meditative. Then the

rhythm would be broken by crashing pots and pans and falling institutional crockery shattering on the floor.

At just that instant, like a magnet, Miss Sadie would appear from around some corner, hands on hips, head moving from side-to-side in complete disdain, and speak her well-worn words: “You Boys,” she would start, “You boys are so Heavenly minded, you are no Earthly good!” Well, she may have had a point.

But that’s the bad rap looking forward has in our day. The assumption is that if we let ourselves think about what awaits us, about Heaven, we will become complacent about things that need our attention here and now. But that’s not what Paul and Isaiah are telling us this morning. In our Epistle, Paul throws in this passing reference to Isaiah’s vision of what is to come, as a way to prepare the Corinthians for his call to change their lives and live as better people in themselves, toward each other, and for the world. Looking forward is how they are to see who they are to be here and now, and what they therefore need to change here and now.

Isaiah is doing the same thing. That inspiring vision of God’s Peaceable Kingdom, where “nothing will hurt or destroy in all God’s Holy Mountain”, comes in the 65th chapter of the Prophet’s book. But, the call to action starts in the part we read this morning, the 58th chapter. Isaiah is holding up God’s vision for what is to come, while telling God’s children to get on the stick and start doing now what will change the earth to be like that vision. He’s clear that we will not get fully there until God brings us into the Heaven and Earth to come, but that doesn’t mean that we are to stop striving for it and just sit and wait.

Looking forward tells us what we are to do. Listen to this call: “Is not this the service I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every

yoke? Share your bread with the hungry, give the homeless a home, cover the naked, do not hide from doing good...Remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...You shall raise up the foundations on which future generations shall stand. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of life.”
(Is. 58:6-12...paraphrased)

This is no call to complacency; to waiting for the sweet by and by. This call is to stand up and be counted; counted as one to be seen standing with the weak, the downtrodden, the helpless; to be heard speaking out in the in the councils of power, and to be felt bearing God’s love by all. Looking forward to Heaven, changes us, and so enables us to change the wrongs of this world here and now. And, that’s why I bring it up this morning.

This morning, we are looking back, in order to assess, and remember, and rightly celebrate, a truly good year of ministry together, doing these very things we are being called to do. But our Scripture is reminding us to keep looking forward as well. With our eyes focused on what’s coming, we will see what’s needed from here, now.

Heaven: it’s out of this world! Quite literally! It’s more wondrous than any metaphor or beauty of creation can even hint at in our imagining. But trying to imagine it; seeing the vision of prophets and apostles will change us to change this world. See the vision of what is coming! Rejoice that it is coming for you! Have hope; act on it, take courage! Look forward!