

Sunday, May 30, 2017

Forest Hills United Methodist Church

Broad Series: Grounded (The life of Jesus in four parts, Exploring Jesus as the incarnation of God in the created world, and how that gives salvation an earth grounding.)

Series Part 4: Dirty Heaven: Jesus' Appearances & Return

Sermon #4: "Heaven on Earth"

Rev. Dr. David Werner

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-22:5

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:11 "God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

Sermon Blurb: End of times! Rapture! Jesus coming back. Did you know that according to the Bible, heaven for eternity will be down here on earth? This Sunday we'll explore what life will be like in eternity. Don't miss it!

Gathering Song: *A Mighty Fortress* -Sanctify

Gathering: Pastor David

Greeting Time: Pastor David

Move to the inner sections.

Worship Set: Sanctify

Even So, Come

Revelation Song

No Longer Slaves

Worship Prayer - Andrew

Kids invited to Kids' Church

Prayers: Pastor David

Observing a moment of silence in honor of Memorial Day Weekend

Offering: *Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending* - Sanctify

Video: Sermon Bumper

PP#1: Quote image from <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/135274>

Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously declared that "Some people are so heavenly minded, that they are no earthly good."

His quote has been repeated because people can get way too focused on heaven. Since Christians claim that we are made for heaven, we can sometimes downplay this life. No need to work too hard here. If you're OK with Jesus, then just hang in there. Grin and bear it. Focus on the spiritual.

Yes, those people are suffering terribly, but when they get to heaven, they'll get their reward. They don't have food, or medicine, or access. But it's not really about this life, is it? God will make it all up to them in heaven.

And this creeps into our thinking when we face tragedy. The little girl died of leukemia. Well, I guess God wanted another angel in heaven. God needed her, so He came to take her home—as if God gave her leukemia! God took her to heaven, so we should celebrate that she has started her true living. Or, yes, things are unfair here, but God is keeping score, and will sort out everything in heaven. Just wait until then, then we'll see who gets what!

But these Christian platitudes have made people bristle at a God who seems impotent in this life, or uncaring, or distant.

Well, the church has, I think, become much better at social activism and caring about others *in this life*, seeking to address the plight of those who are the least, the lost, and the left out.

In fact, I think that over the last 50 years, reactions like Holmes' quote have gained such traction, that the opposite has become true. In our culture today, and yes, even with Christians and the church, we are tipping towards being so *earthly* focused that we are in danger of being *no heavenly* good!

We struggle to talk about heaven! A hundred years ago, nearly every Christian song had some reference to heaven, and songs about heaven were the biggest section of the hymnal. But as the human condition in our country has improved, our focus on heaven has diminished. In some ways, we have heaven on earth! Many have ample food, necessities, opportunities, medicine, and many luxuries. Our biggest problems are needing to replace our eight-year-old car, and three-year-old smart phone.

But there's something about heaven that is compelling, and fosters hope, perseverance, and deep joy. We, and those around us, our culture, needs to hear the Christian message that there is more than meets the eye. There is an emptiness in the luxuries of this life, and we need to hear that there is something more coming! And without being cliché, we need to find ways to offer the joy that heaven brings *into this life*. Earlier this month, over half of our confirmation students, when saying why they wanted to be Christians and follow Jesus, named heaven and life after death.

We need to find a way to reclaim heaven!

PP#2: Dirty Heaven: Heaven on Earth

“God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” -Ecclesiastes 3:11

Dirty Heaven: Heaven on Earth. Ecclesiastes 3:11 “God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Heaven's a pretty big deal in the Bible, and in salvation. We are moving to an end, a goal. We're not just cycling around and around, or randomly meandering through time. In the biblical understanding of history, we are headed somewhere. And that has eternal ramifications for today.

PP#3: Grounded: The Story of Salvation in Dirt!

Advent Series: God's Dirty Hands - Jesus' pre-existence and birth

New Year's Series: God's Dirty Feet - Jesus' public ministry on earth

Lenten Series: Dirty Faith - Jesus' Passion (Jesus' last week in Jerusalem)

Spring Series: Dirty Heaven - Jesus in Paradise and Return

We've been tracing the life of Jesus since Christmas, calling this six-month series "Grounded." Our God is a grounded God. Jesus was the Word of creation, and God got His hands dirty—in the dirt—when He shaped people at creation. Then God *took on* dirt when Jesus was born with a human body, and walked around in the dirt. Jesus' dirty feet. God experienced the dirty deeds people do, as sin mercilessly nailed Jesus to a cross. Christian faith is dirty, dealing with sin, and graves in the ground.

But Jesus rose again, and ascended back to heaven. Last week, Andrew explained that heaven is dirty, too, in that heaven will be on earth, literally, and that heaven affects our daily lives, now.

So, today we come to the last of our extended grounded series, and we see that all of history is headed toward heaven. One day, Jesus will come back to earth, and life as we know it will be changed. New life, eternal life, will begin, and never end. Those who take Jesus now, get to live with Him for eternity.

PP#4: *Images of Jesus descending down to earth, leading angels....without wings!!*

And, as Andrew also pointed out, the heaven of one day, will be here on earth, down here in the dirt. When Jesus comes back, He will be bringing heaven, in all it's fullness and intention, down to earth. Heaven is not up there, up in the sky, with us floating on clouds with wings and harps. In the Bible, people do not get wings in heaven. In fact, most angels don't have wings. Of all the nearly 300 times angels are mentioned in the Bible, only two kinds of angels are described as having wings. These are specialized angels: cherubim (Exodus 25:20; Ezekiel 10) and seraphim (Isaiah 6). The rest never have wings. This includes the angels of Christmas. They appear in the sky, but they are not flying by wing power. The Bible never describes them with wings.

And the reason for this is because the Bible doesn't understand heaven as up in the sky. Jesus ascends to heaven, in this case meaning to God's presence. But He will one day descend back down to earth. He is going to bring heaven down to earth. Heaven will be on earth, with dirt.

PP#5: The Rapture (the word does not appear in the Bible)

"16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words." 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (NIV)

(See also Matthew 24:30-31 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-53)

We often talk about Jesus' return using the word "rapture." The word doesn't appear in the Bible, but it comes from the Latin word meaning "carried away" or "up." In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul explains that when Jesus comes back at the end times, Jesus' followers will be "carried up" into the air to meet Him, first the dead—who are raised, then the living. But Jesus is not going up into heaven. He's coming down to earth. His followers are carried up into the air to meet Him as He is coming down, and we will then be joined into the heavenly throng, and then come back down to the ground, where the rest of history will play out.

In the book of Revelation, the last in the Bible, the apostle John explains a vision God gave him. It's a vision about heaven, and heaven is described symbolically as a new Jerusalem, a whole, vast city, that descends down out of the sky, and is planted on earth. As we read Revelation 21, pay attention to how heaven is described as being on earth.

PP#6: Revelation 21:1-7 (NIV)

21:1 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Verse one, “Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’

PP#7: Revelation 21:1-7 (NIV)

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then He said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

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The chapter goes on to describe this new city of Jerusalem. Again, symbolic language is used. For example, it’s size is described as being exactly a massive cube, 1,400 miles long, wide, and high! (Rev. 21:16) The city walls are 200 feet thick!

PP#8: Rev. 21:21 “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.”

Perhaps you’ve heard of some of the descriptions. There are 12 gates, and each gate is a giant pearl - the pearly gates! The main street of the city is paved gold, but transparent like glass. What a gleaming image!

Actually, all the descriptions of heaven are images, symbols, and metaphors. The Bible doesn’t really describe heaven physically, even though it does describe heaven will be a physical place on earth. That’s because, since it will all be made new, it is not really describable in our current understandings, or in our current language. It will be, well, you know, new.

Perhaps the most vivid descriptions of heaven are in the next chapter, Revelation 22. It describes heaven as the Garden of Eden restored. Paradise lost, paradise restored. Andrew talked

about this last week. Eden is God and people, face-to-face, personally together, as originally intended.

And this is really the most powerful descriptions of heaven in Scripture. It doesn't describe the physical attributes. It describes much more important attributes.

PP#9: Heaven in Revelation 21

1. Earth and heaven will be new - the old will passed away (21:1, 4-5)
2. Heaven is the Holy City Jerusalem - Where God dwells (21:2)
3. Heaven is a bride for God, an intimate relationship with God (21:2)
4. God dwells directly with people - the covenant fulfilled (21:3, 7)
5. No more sorrow, death, crying or pain (21:4)
6. Jesus is the Beginning and the End (21:6)
7. Heaven is living water (21:6)
8. Heaven is for God's children (21:7)

This life, as we know it, is passing away. Earth, heaven, and we will be made new. God will be with people, and we will have an intimate, personal relationship with Him. All the things that break our hearts will be gone, including evil, hatred, and death. Jesus, who created everything in the beginning, will recreate it all, and finish it into its original intention. We will be refreshed like the thirsty drinking water. Heaven is for God's children.

PP#10: *Concept image(s) for what heaven may look like, subtitled, "I can only imagine!" (Perhaps using the gaming image of leveling up?)*

Now, we can get so focused on trying to figure out heaven's physical descriptions—what heaven will look like, in earthly concepts, that we can miss the spiritual point the Bible is trying to make. In this way, too, we can be so earthly focused we are no heavenly good!

You see, ultimately, it's these descriptions of the non-physical promises of heaven that make heaven so important, so exciting, so powerful for us. This is where our joy comes from!

PP#11: Heaven on earth

1. Now in part, then fully

1 Corinthians 13:12 "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

We have now, already, part of heaven's joy on earth. We are not alone. God is with us. We can know God personally, and have His Spirit live within us, navigating us through everything in life, even carrying us when it becomes too much. We can walk with Jesus, today, and live with His forgiveness now. But, it's going to get even better. God's plan is not yet fulfilled. Now we still deal with temptation, with faltering into sin, with heartache and trouble, with physical death and loneliness and despair. But we have a joy that carries us through it all, a joy that comes in knowing Jesus. And that joy increases and increases, as the other decreases. At the end of time, all that is ungodly will be defeated, and only the joy will remain. This is the one thing about heaven we must grasp. Heaven is our joy is maxed out!

This promise of heaven is included in the famous love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. You'll probably hear it at weddings this summer. When you do, listen for the heaven promise. It's verse 12,

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Heaven is our joy maxed out! Why is it included in the Love Chapter? This promise makes us able–want to–hang in there, hold on, remain faithful, and give it our all. We can have heaven–in part–now on earth.

PP#12: Heaven on earth

1. Now in part, then fully
 2. Share our joy with others
- 2 Peter 3:9-12 “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance....You look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

Jesus came to usher in God’s Kingdom on earth. He got it all started. Then, He handed it off to us, His followers, to keep it going. We are called to continue Jesus’ work. God’s desire is that everyone hear about Jesus and the joy He offers. Why is the end being put off? Is God slow? No! God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish. He is giving time for us, His people, to share the gospel. But Jesus is coming back. Time draws near. So we must be focused, purposeful. We are driven by urgency. We speed its coming.

We cannot keep this joy to ourselves. We need to share why we have this joy with others. We need to live in a way that shows others a different alternative in life, and we must be poised to talk about the joy in our hearts, when the Holy Spirit creates openings. We must not keep our joy to ourselves! It is not just given for us. It is also given to us for our neighbors. Don’t get complacent!

PP#13: Heaven on earth

1. Now in part, then fully
 2. Share our joy with others
 3. Fully live this life, lightly
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13 “We do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.”

God sends us into this world, to work His work in making it more the way He intends. We live fully, here and now, doing earthly good. But this world is full of trouble. God does not promise to spare us from it all. And heaven is a powerful help through what we must endure. What can be used as clichéd platitudes also does proclaim truth we cannot forget.

We are not made for this life. This is just for a time. We have great joy and blessings, yes. But it is only a foretaste. I’ve told my kids over and over again. I’m a Christian. I’m a Jesus follower. Should the Lord tarry, I will die. But it’s OK. I’m not made for this life. God has heaven in store for me. I even have my grave plot purchased and ready! I’ll live life fully now, each day as God intends. I’ll work hard, and give it my all. But I hold on to my life here loosely.

And heaven does bring some hope into the rottenness of this life. God is watching. God knows when we suffer and are treated unfairly. God does promise He will one day set things right. It won’t be joy from the vengeance, but from rightness being restored. And although the pain of the little girl dying of leukemia will never be removed in this life, there is joy in knowing that God rescued her and took her to heaven. I tell my kids, it may be sad for you when I die—at least I hope!—but I’ll just be starting a party that you will get to come to, as well. Same is true if they die first. Yes, the pain of losing what we used to have together will always be very real. But we have a bigger hope.

That's what Paul is saying in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. We hurt. We grieve. We experience our hearts breaking. No platitudes can take that away. But because of Jesus, we don't grieve without hope. We are not overcome, because we have a hope that carries us. This world is not our home.

I remember when Pastor Rick Warren's son committed suicide four years ago. Rick is one of the most famous pastors of our day. Thousands were praying for his son as he battled with depression. He gave his son the best treatment the medical world could offer. But in the end, God did not heal him from his depression, and he committed suicide. Nothing could adequately explain the wrenching pain he and his family felt. But Rick also said that darkness did not win. They grieved, but they did not grieve as people without hope. They were able to release his son into God's arms, and speak of the joy that God gave them.

This weekend we remember those who have died serving our country. That pain is real. Nothing can, or should, diminish it. But we remember also with hope, and celebrate their gift. General George S. Patton said, "It is foolish and wrong to mourn the men who died. Rather we should thank God that such men lived." We don't *only* mourn. We must also thank God for them.

We live fully this life, but we hold on to it lightly. This world is not our home.

PP#14: Dirty Heaven: Heaven on Earth

"God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." -Ecclesiastes 3:11

"God has made everything beautiful in its time." There is beauty here, in this life. God intends for us to enjoy it, to live fully. There is beauty even as we experience pain. But God "has also set eternity in the human heart." God has made us for eternity.

"No one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." We can't adequately explain all the experiences of this life. But we do trust in God, who is the Beginning and the End. This is our joy. This is our hope.

God intends for Christians to be so heavenly minded that we are so earthly good. Heaven on earth, walking with Jesus for eternity.

Amen.

Closing Song: *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*

Benediction: Pastor David