

A VISION OF HEAVEN

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE
SUNDAY, MAY 5, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

REV. 21:10; 21:22-22:5

John the Revelator gives us in the 21st and 22nd chapters of his defining work a vision of heaven, to which he was carried in the Spirit. The vision is of a city beautiful and grand beyond belief.

I spared you some of the details. You can go home this afternoon and read these chapters and fill in the picture, of the precious stones and metals, and grand dimensions.

I once had someone ask me if John's vision was "real", if that was really the way that heaven was going to be. I asked that question that we never should ask, but that small children always ask: "Why?"

He answered, "Because if heaven is a city, I don't want to go there. I can't stand cities. I love the mountains and the woods, and the rivers and lakes, and being cooped up in town for eternity wouldn't be heaven for me, it would be hell."

You know, I'm inclined to agree with him.

But John's vision was a symbolic vision, not an actual trip to heaven. What John saw was fraught with meaning, and it was his task to relate the vision back to a world eager to hear it.

After you've read your Bibles this afternoon, you can go on the internet, and using whatever search engine you prefer, type in the title of this morning's sermon. Just enter "a vision of heaven."

You will be amazed at what you find! It is incredible the number of people who have been clinically dead, who have gone to heaven, and who have come back to earth and to life and who have told their stories.

One of the best is Don Piper, who tells his story in a book, entitled (I think) *Ninety Minutes in Heaven*. He was "killed" in an automobile accident, his "body" covered by a tarp it was so badly broken, his car (a Ford Escort) crushed by a tractor-trailer rig that hit him head on on a bridge.

Don's story is of being at the gates of heaven, of seeing a huge multitude of people, but not a one of that multitude was a stranger to him, they were all people he knew and loved who had died. He heard wonderful music being played and sung, and then he woke up to hear someone singing a hymn to him as he lay under the tarp in the wreckage of his car.

Now Don Piper is a pastor, and I suppose for a pastor to have a vision of heaven, or even a visit to heaven, is not miraculous, or even unexpected.

But when one reads the stories on line and in books, it becomes amazing how many ordinary people, and teen-agers, and even children, have experienced the same sorts of visions of heaven, visions of a place of beauty and light and indescribable music, and crowds of loving and familiar faces.

In 1975, Raymond Moody published *Life After Life*, in which he recounted interviews with more than a hundred people who had experienced near-death or clinical death experiences.

His title was a neat take-off on Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book, *On Life After Death*, which she had published three years earlier. Dr. Kubler-Ross really must be viewed as the mother of thanatology, the study of death, and her first work *On Death and Dying*, published in 1969, defined for all time the stages of grief. When asked in a television interview if her studies of near-death experiences, of conversations with those who'd been to heaven had had an impact on her, she replied. "Yes...I am now a believer, and before, I was not."

But the writing about life after life, life after death, about a vision of heaven, doesn't end there. Just last year, Eben Alexander, like Moody and Kubler-Ross, an M.D., published *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*.

Unlike Moody and Kubler-Ross, but like Don Piper, this is the story of his own near death experience, of his own visit to heaven.

In my years of ministry, I've talked with a number of people who've had near death experiences, who've been clinically dead, and come back. Two lovely ladies from the Arcadia church, Ruth Thomas and Lillian Grace, told me of their experiences, and have now made that journey to the kingdom which surely awaits us.

Oh, wait! John's vision was of the City of Heaven! There's a kingdom of heaven! The city is in the kingdom! But the kingdom! Oh, the kingdom! That's where the woods, and the lakes and the mountains are.

Bill Bailey told me that. Bill was a crusty old sailor who wound up in the assisted living in Arcadia where I did a Wednesday chapel service for a dozen years. He'd lost his voice box to cancer, so he sort of croaked instead of talking. He had two messages, which he would share with the youth group of the church I served. One was, "Don't smoke! You'll wind up like me."

The other was the story of how he was pronounced dead in a hospital in Abingdon, Virginia. They took his clothes off, put him on a gurney, covered him with a sheet, and rolled the gurney into the morgue at the hospital. While they were waiting for the funeral home to come and get his mortal remains, Bill came back to life, and walked, naked, out of the morgue and down the hall into the emergency room. He created quite a stir.

But during the time he was "dead", Bill went to heaven. When I asked him what heaven was like, he replied: "Beautiful! Mountains, meadows, blue skies, blue water."

When one of the young ladies in our youth group asked him why he thought God sent him back, he smiled and said, "To tell the story, so you'll know heaven's real."

As Bill got closer to death, he lost his ability to speak, but not to smile. And he and I had a signal, a sign that he used to remind me about where we were both going, about where we'd meet again someday. It was simply a thumbs up.

Now, I'm going to talk too long this morning, but it is worth hearing.

The first time I heard from someone who had been to heaven and come back to life, was when I was home from seminary for Spring Break in 1969. My father had been in the hospital, and had just come home.

Three years earlier, Dad had had open heart surgery, and had had his aorta and iliac arteries essentially replaced with Dacron tubing. He had continued to eat what he wanted, to smoke like a chimney, to get no exercise other than jumping to conclusions, and chasing rainbows, and he was in bad shape.

When Dad had his surgery, his heart had stopped three times. They literally sent him back to his room to die, but instead he lived, and several weeks later they were able to successfully perform the hours-long procedure.

Dad took me aside one afternoon, and told me that he'd had something happen when his heart stopped. He said that the first time, he was aware of being outside his body, looking down as they worked on him. It was like he was floating up around the ceiling of the operating room. Then when they zapped his body with the defibrillator, he said it was like someone grabbed him by the ankles and pulled him back into his body.

The second time, he had floated through the ceiling of the hospital, and could see the stars in the sky, and the Christmas lights on top of the buildings. And, he said, they must have zapped him again, because he was jerked back into his body.

The third time, he said he woke up in a beautiful place. It was a green and grassy field, with wildflowers blooming, and he could hear a creek running over rocks. In the distance were mountains, and overhead a blue sky with white fluffy clouds, and he could see people coming toward him, waving, running, skipping, jumping, coming to welcome him.

And then they zapped him again.

My father told me that he knew he'd been to heaven. And that he wasn't afraid to die anymore. And he asked me to ask those learned men who taught at the seminary about what had happened to him.

This was years before Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Raymond Moody and all the others wrote and told their stories. I'd never heard anything like it before. I was afraid that if I told anyone at the seminary about my father's experiences, they'd think I was crazy, or that he was.

Well, he wasn't, and I'm not. I talked to a man who'd had a vision of heaven. Who'd been there, and come back to tell the story. He's name was Theodore Jefferson Land. He was my father. He was not a pastor, not a neurosurgeon, not even much of a church goer. But he believed in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, and for the last three and a half years of his life, he spent a lot of time praying. I think he was praying for me and for his other three sons.

We buried him on his 56th birthday. His youngest son will turn 56 this month. I'm his oldest. I'm 66. I've lived forty-four years since I talked to a man who'd been to heaven and come back, and I've never been afraid to die, either.

John the Revelator saw the city. Others have seen the kingdom. Thanks be to God, who gives us the kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen and amen.