

### Thoughts of Heaven and Earth

Originally I had intended to preach a totally different sermon this Sunday, but then I read a chapter in Susan McCaslin's new book by Wood Lake titled "Arousing the Spirit." Suddenly a theme for All Saints presented itself a particularly compelling way. Her chapter begins:

*A few months ago, I attended a gospel choir concert in Vancouver and found myself singing along to the old hymns about "crossing over Jordan" and "going home."  
Don't get me wrong;  
I'm not depressed, ready to die, or in need of consolation over the death of a loved one.  
But somehow the intensity of the longing for a paradise beyond the temporal world as we know it move me unexpectedly.  
I began to wonder again if I would see my deceased parents in some future state, where they are now, and whether and in what conditions individual consciousness might survive the death of the body.*

Susan notes that while much in current progressive Protestant thought appeals to her; the afterlife tends to get ignored.

There is little focus on what Thomas Merton called: "the paradise ear"- being attentive to that which lies beyond the physical material world. Our culture tends to focus on the here and now, the concrete and tangible, as if there were no other dimensions to our existence.

Yet many will speak of near-death experiences when they could observe their bodies below them, and they were drawn to a warm white light, and felt a great serenity.

Hospice workers tell of those close to death having visions of loved ones who had gone before. Many who have been recently bereaved will experience something out of the ordinary - something they take to be a sign that their deceased loved one is near, assuring them all is well.

Some stories may seem so out of the ordinary that we are hesitant to mention them.

For instance, years ago, a young woman had a dream that her aunt came to visit and made a point of saying to her, "I want you to know I am alright."  
When she woke up, she thought to herself "That's an odd dream!"  
Why would I have dreamt about my aunt who lives a thousand miles away?  
Then she got the phone call from her family saying that her aunt had died that night.  
When she told them about the dream, she got some further news.  
The aunt was not just her aunt; she was her birth mother.  
As was sometimes practiced in an earlier era,  
the unwed aunt secretly had given her newborn to a married sibling.

My father told me of a time in his ministry when he was called to the hospital.

A terrible car accident left an older couple in his congregation both seriously injured.

He found their son in the father's hospital room. The father had just died.  
The son said his mother was in another hospital room two floors up.  
She herself was not doing well and the son wondered how he would be able to tell her.  
So he asked my dad to go with him, but when they arrived, they didn't need to tell her.  
She already knew. "Your dad visited me in a vision and told me the news," she said.

It's been said that we are going to be surprised by the people we meet in heaven. According to the book of Revelation, it will definitely be so.

John of Patmos maintains that in heaven there will be people gathered from every single nation and tribe and language on earth, all offering their praise. We might even be surprised to find folks that weren't even on our invitation list – those against whom we have long held grudges and resentments.

And they all are there sitting at the heavenly banqueting table. For no matter how inclusive we think we are in our embrace of others, heaven--according to John of Patmos--will be far more so.

And we might be surprised by the scope of healing we will encounter there. Today's passage from Revelation gives the assurance:

*God will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain any more,  
for the former things have passed away."*

Nora Tubbs Tisdale teaches at Yale University. She comments:

*I know that [many] of us already think of heaven as a place of personal healing. And what a comfort it is to know that our loved ones, many of whom have suffered great physical or mental or emotional illness in this life, will be completely whole in the life to come.*

*But when John lifts up the veil and lets us have a glimpse into heaven, we see that the healing that will go on there is far broader than that of our own personal lives and the lives of our loved ones.*

*For heaven is also a place where all the injustices of this world will finally be made right, where the lowly will be lifted up, the mighty brought low--as Mary foretold in her "Magnificat" --and where God's vision of a community of justice and peace and equality will finally hold sway.*

It will be a healing of the whole social order. Even so, we work and pray for such healing on earth, here and now.

Sunday by Sunday we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And surely we can be encouraged in our own endeavours by a sense of being accompanied by those who went before us, who sought to make a better world.

In El Salvador, during All Saints services in many of the churches, they will read out a list of their recent martyrs – people like Oscar Romero who died for the sake of a better society.

Each time a name is read out, the congregation calls out "Presente!" ("Present!") "Oscar Romero" "Presente!" "Julia Elba Ramos." "Presente!"

It is as if they are taking roll call and reminding themselves that those who have passed before them still are present in their lives and communities.

This All Saints Sunday, we are reminded of the near presence of those who have gone before. When we commune with God in worship, we also commune with them.

It was Susan McCaslin's book that set in motion these reflections, and its with an excerpt from her book that we will conclude.

*Without seeking life-beyond-death experiences, I have found that encounters with those who have passed over have occurred at crucial times in my life, particularly in association with the deaths of my parents. My father died at the age of sixty-six after a long struggle with Lou Gehrig's disease, or ALS. He suffered a devastating deterioration of the nerves that control the muscles, leaving him a human shipwreck unable to lift his head and barely able to speak. Just before he died, Dad told me that he had had a dream where he found himself hurtling across space to the other side of the universe – fearless, exhilarated, and curious about what came next.*

*Six years after his death, Dad appeared to me in the state between dreaming and waking. He was serving me breakfast at a big oak table like the one we had at home when I was a kid, He had prepared his favourite thing – what he called the Saturday Morning Super-Dooper-Wing-Ding Breakfast. He had spread out strips of greasy bacon, hunks of sausage, fried eggs, mounds of buttered toast, hash browns, grapefruit, prunes, milk, juice, marmalade, jams, and a big jar of peanut butter.*

*One surprising feature of this dream-vision was that Dad seemed to have aged backward. He appeared at the head of his ample breakfast table as if breaking the fast of our not seeing one another.*

*The other outstanding detail was that he sat shirtless at the table. I realized later that this was to show me that he had completely regained the musculature that had been ravaged by the wasting disease. I will never forget his infectious smile, as if he had organized this banquet as a huge surprise.*

*I wrote about this experience in a poem titled "Postscript: Visionary Father."*

*Six years and nothing,  
(my vagrant ineffective cries)  
not a day without thought of you.*

*This morning you break (fast) with me  
suddenly, sunny side up.  
The shine of you, the glare.  
How is it you dare to be younger  
than I, your middle-aged self?  
What do they grow in neverland  
that makes you glow?*

*We have reversed ourselves –  
you drew me here  
then left for there.  
I am her in your there  
communing with you now.*

*How your growing backwards  
surpasses me, your skin's peach  
and dew more real than fingered stone.*

*But if I reach to touch or speak  
the power breaks and you go sliding back;  
like the ghost you are not  
into the fullness you have become.*