

## Let's Go Deeper

September 28, 2016

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word;  
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation  
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to thy people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32, RSV)

Last Sunday, I asked the question, “How can we live our lives in such a way that at life’s end we can say, ‘Lord, now let your servant depart in peace?’”

I posited several reasons why one would *not* be able to depart in peace, including:

- **Reaching life’s end prematurely.** Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet who died at the age of 39, did not go peacefully. He famously wrote:  
*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*
- **Regrets.** “I wish had...” “If I had only...” “If I had it to do over again, I would have...” Regrets can foreclose the possibility of departing in peace.
- **A misspent life.** I recalled the man I overheard years ago mutter, “I’m looking for something and, by God, before I die I’m gonna find it!” I wonder if he ever did. He sounded like he’d spent his life climbing the proverbial “ladder of success” only to reach the top and realize the ladder he’d spent his life climbing was propped against the wrong wall.
- Still other folks can’t depart in peace because there is still **so much to be done**. Things they want to see and do. Loose ends they want to tie up.

Here’s one more reason people may not be able to depart in peace: **uneasiness about what (if anything) comes next.**

Do you remember what it was that bothered Huckleberry Finn so much about Miss Watson’s depiction of Heaven? In Huck’s words, “She said all a body would have to do was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever.” To which Huck said, “If that’s all it is, I don’t want to go there.”

Allene Boone was a kindred spirit to Huck. She was a member of the church I served in North Carolina during the 90s. As she grappled with the illness that would soon claim her life, she asked me, “David, is heaven really a place of eternal rest?”

In my most pastoral voice, I said, “Oh yes, Allene, absolutely.”

To which she said, “Well, I hope not! I can’t bear the thought of lying around in a hammock forever twiddling my thumbs. I’ve been sick so long that I’m looking forward to being able to *do* things again. There are so many things I haven’t had a



Simeon’s Song of Praise  
Rembrandt van Rijn 1669

chance to try yet in this life. I don't want eternal rest. I want eternal life!"

I thought of Allene last month when I was doing some research for the worship series on the art in Central's sanctuary. Robert Baron, in a book titled *Heaven in Stone and Glass: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Great Cathedrals*<sup>1</sup>, offers a series of profound meditations on the biblical and theological meanings in Gothic cathedrals. He introduced me to a new understanding of heaven as a place of eternal rest:

“For the medieval theologians, heaven was a place of rest, but we must be careful lest we misconstrue this term. It has nothing to do with inactivity or indolence; it has everything to do with savoring, tasting, and active engagement. Thomas Aquinas says that the will has two basic acts: it seeks the good that it does not possess, and rests in the good that it does possess. Thus one can seek to have a million dollars, but one rests in a good baseball game, an engaging conversation, a work of art. Heaven is resting in the beauty of God, that is, ecstatically appreciating it, being drawn totally out of oneself in the loving and tasting of it.”

I wrote in my prayer journal: If heaven is a place of “savoring, tasting, and active engagement” with the beauty of God, then we receive a foretaste of eternal life every time we see and savor the beauty of holiness, namely, anything that is good, right, true, and just.

I think Paul is saying the same thing in Philippians 4:8 when he writes, “**Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**”

Several years ago, I began the practice of carrying an index card in my shirt pocket. Throughout the day, whenever I see what seems to me a glimpse of grace, I write it down. Whenever I hear something insightful, inspiring, provocative, or “gospel true,” I write it down. In sum, whenever I perceive “the beauty of God”-- when “**mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples**”-- I scribble it on my index card. Then, at night or first thing the next morning, I pull out the card and review it item by item, savoring what I've seen or heard throughout the day. Invariably, some of the best moments of my day are the ones spent reviewing and reliving the items on that card.

Robert Barron, the medieval theologians, and Paul would say of my daily delight:

“It's no wonder you enjoy it so. Savoring, tasting, and active engagement with the beauty of God is what heaven is all about. What you're delighting in for a few fleeting minutes now is a blessed foretaste of what will be unending in the age to come.”

If that is true, and I believe it is, I can live and depart in peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 31