

“Leaving the Shadowlands”

And so, at last, we come to the end of a journey that began all of eighteen months ago. From the first verse of the Bible “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” to its closing words, sixty-six books and a couple of thousand pages later, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.” We’ve walked the Bible from end to end and what a journey it has been; from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane; from the smelting furnace of Egypt to the waterbrooks of Canaan where a shepherd-king named David knelt to cool his thirst; from the holy mountain of Sinai where the Law was written by the finger of God to the hill of the Skull where the grace of God was poured out in the sangre de Christo (the blood of Christ). We have gone from a garden paradise emptied of its occupants to a garden tomb left open and empty by the only occupant it had ever known. We have seen a loose federation of slaves turn into a unified theocracy whose calling it was to be a light to the nations. We saw that same kingdom divide and fall

crushed and splintered under the weight of its relentless idolatry and its tragic inability to keep faith with its covenant partner. And as much as we didn't want to, we saw ourselves in those people. We did not want to watch as they were once again driven as slaves into exile, because we know what it is like to feel cut-off and far from home as the inevitable consequence of our stubborn will to sin. We looked with longing for the one Isaiah described as God's Suffering Servant, and we felt our own hearts leap when a latter-day prophet named John stood by the water's edge pointing to a solitary figure and said "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". Like every other disciple Jesus has ever had, we walked in the halt and stumbling footsteps of his first fallible followers. And we winced with recognition at every struggle those early churches had, because, maybe, we have had them too. We did not want to relate to the inexplicable suffering of Job, but we felt it in our bones because not one of us (not one of us) has moved through this life unscathed by sorrows we didn't see coming. And who among us, at the touch of Jesus, could not rejoice in and echo the words of that newly healed man, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see"? In short, we started out to read their story, and were startled at how

quickly we recognized it to be our own. We wanted to feel superior to those misguided desert wanderers, and then were humbled to discover that many of them knew things spiritually that we haven't (or ain't) had time to learn. In a word, we discovered that we are part of the story that was being told; one that awaits its consummation in a future that hovers ever-so-close at hand.

So lets make sure we notice this morning how, in pointing us toward the grand and unstoppable completion of all that God commenced to do at the dawn of creation, God weaves into a beautiful unity a host of themes from all that we have read and studied up till now. The God who will usher in the new heaven and the new earth, spoken of in verse 1, is the one and same God who created the first heaven and the first earth. In the words of my "spirit of the Reformation Study Bible, "God is the Alpha, the creator, whose purposes were expressed in creation from the beginning. Now he shows himself to be the Omega, the Consummator, who brings his purposes to final realization." We already know about Jerusalem, the City of David, the city over which Jesus wept; and here, in verse 2, we see the Holy City revitalized by God himself and established as the eternal dwelling

place of God among his people on a renewed earth. We already know about the covenant of marriage established by God in the second chapter of Genesis; and here, in the second verse of Revelation 21, our final communion with God is expressed through the imagery of marriage. We have known since before the days of Solomon that God made the breath-taking promise to be approachable in our midst through the establishment of the tabernacle and the temple; and here, in verse 3, God assures us that the day will dawn when he will dwell permanently in our midst. From the earliest letters in the new Testament we were given to understand that saints were not the few, the proud, the rare devout ones who stood out among God's people, but were, in fact, everyone who belonged to Jesus Christ; and here in verse 3, we hear God's declaration that we will ever and always be his people and that he will live with us and be our God forever. We have known from the sad third chapter of Genesis that sin brought in it's wake both suffering and death, and here, in verse 4, we are told that God will wipe every tear from our eyes and that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will pass away. We have learned from the beginning that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,

and here, in verse 5, Jesus himself (who is the source of this Revelation to John on the Isle of Patmos) says, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true”. Jesus had assured the woman at the well that he could give her living water, water that would refresh her forever; and here, in verse 6, he says, “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life”. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God; and here, in verse 7, we are told that those who overcome will inherit all this, and that they will be God’s children. Throughout the Bible those who willfully and permanently turn their back on God are warned of the judgment to come; and here, in verse 8, the place they have chosen for themselves is described in brief but horrific detail. In verse 8 the judgment so long forestalled, finally takes place, and it comes as an irreversible spiritual death.

Can you see how clearly God’s hand has shaped and steered that content of this book called simply “The Bible”? Sixty-six books, written by scores of authors, in three different languages, by people from every walk of life, people who walked the corridors of power and

people who wrote from prison cells, the learned and the rough hewn, kings and slaves, fishermen and exiles, survivors of vastly different eras and political regimes, separated by more than a thousand years – and yet, somehow, all these themes, traceable and woven together like so many threads from Genesis to Revelation, together bear a towering testimony that all of them (as Peter said) were carried along by the same Holy Spirit. The unity of the Bible didn't just happen, and neither does it hang together as the result of some clever latter-day editing. It comes to us with astonishing completeness and coherence because the God who inspired it all has been trying to get through to us from day one. And the last word of it was not written until the self-disclosing God was confident that we had in it everything we need to know for our life and for our salvation. Whatever else we have learned in the past year and a half I hope we have learned at least that much.

Now, let me take the time that remains to talk about heaven and hell, because however we understand the specifics of the one or the other, we will by our own choices, deal with one of them for a very long time. Let's start with heaven, since 7 of the 8 verses of our text for this

morning, focus on its reality. And I don't think that is accidental. I am convinced that God wants us to embrace our fellowship with him out of love, not out of fear. How flattered would you be if your fiancé said, "You know, I really don't want to marry you, but it beats the alternative, I guess"? God acquaints us with the reality of hell in the same way a parent who cares acquaints their child with the grisly potential disasters of combining drinking and driving; but clearly, the parent would hope and prefer that their child would choose to drive safely because driving is a privilege and it's good to be alive and it is not good to kill someone else. He may set before us life and death, but he wants us to choose life.

So we start with heaven. And let me throw in one more preliminary comment. We believe in heaven (and hell) because Jesus taught and spoke about them both as concrete realities. That's good enough for me. Jesus was never wrong about anything. And so I believe in heaven (and hell) because Jesus does. If I didn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God, I might feel free to modify or simply not believe in heaven or hell. But if the one who is the Truth tells me to take them

seriously, it would be patently illogical to believe him on every other point, but not this. So I believe him. Absolutely.

What we need to think about, is what the Bible about heaven, as opposed to what Hollywood imagines as heaven. As I've said before, Hollywood is somehow stuck on the idea that heaven is either a vast and wispy cloud bank way out in outer space (at the entrance of which sits a white-bearded guy – probably Peter – checking names like a reservations clerk in a motel) or it's more like a big cornfield in Iowa. Either way it's pretty corny, (if you'll forgive the pun). Heaven, according to the Bible, is not corny. And according to our text for today it would probably be more accurate to think of heaven coming to us than about us going to heaven. According to the Bible, God created a beautiful and flawless universe. When human beings chose to rebel against him and sin, our sin planted the seeds that would destroy us and consequently wreak havoc on the rest of God's creation. So God chose to redeem us through the death and resurrection of Christ, and if we accept his grace and his will to re-establish our relationship through him, God promises us a permanent future in his presence on a new (or renewed) earth. In other words

when we talk about life in the kingdom of heaven, we are talking about a concrete existence in physically resurrected bodies on an earth that is just as real and complex and beautiful as the one we are living in right now, only without the tragic fall-out brought about by sin in short, fullness of life as God intended it originally without, death or suffering, sin or pain. Life with God on a pristine earth forever. Growing, learning, deepening, loving, creative life. Not corny. Just good and holy and wholesome life with God forever. What about those who have died in Christ already? Jesus said he would prepare a place for us. It is a wonderful place because it is with Jesus. But the word he uses to describe our abode with him is the word used to describe a temporary shelter. In other words, we believe that when our physical body dies, our very alive soul is ushered immediately (“this day”) and consciously into the presence of our Living Lord. Then, at the moment of God’s choosing, Jesus will appear in a Second Coming that will be manifest to all the earth. On that day our physical bodies will be re-constituted and resurrected, and in that self-same hour our bodies and souls will be permanently re-united, the only difference being that our bodies will enjoy the capabilities that Jesus demonstrated after his resurrection. In short the reality of

his physical resurrection is the central guarantee of our physical resurrection. Are our loved ones in Christ with him? Yes. Will we be re-united with them and live in the fullness of life described by our text? Yes. Is that saccharine or corny or goofy? Not in the least. And we believe it because Jesus says it will be so.

What about hell? Do we believe in the reality of hell? Unless we believe Jesus got this one wrong we must believe in hell. The word Jesus frequently used for hell was gehenna. Gehenna was another name for the valley of Ben Hinnom – which was essentially a garbage dump just south of Jerusalem. It was a place where refuse of all kinds was taken and eventually incinerated. It was a real place where it seemed that the smoke and fires never went out. Now, we have to be careful here. While I don't think Jesus meant that those who refuse to be in relationship with God will consign themselves to a garbage dump just south of Jerusalem, I do believe he is talking about a real and physical reality – a place of permanent exile, away from the presence of God. Will the sorrow and anguish of being in that place be real? I don't see how it could be otherwise. Are the “flames” of hell real or figurative? In my opinion, it wouldn't make

much difference. Hell is the truth known too late, when we cannot change our mind or reverse our refusal to acknowledge God or to accept his Christ. In all seriousness, whatever its physical dimensions will be, the prospect of hell and its substantial reality ought to appall us. If, as every adult knows, our choices always have consequences, then our fore-parents in the faith were much wiser and more sensible and infinitely more mature when they refused to ignore the very real prospect of hell. Only a childish and biblically ignorant culture wants to pretend there is not hell; in much the same way it wants to pretend that there really is no one we have to answer to, and no particular reason for our existence. But like Gollum in “The Lord of the Rings” the more we misplace our rightful worship. The less human we become. In the end, it will be our choices that will fit us either for heaven or for hell. And God will not be mocked or trifled with. If we don’t take this seriously we will be the most foolish generation in twenty-one centuries. I’m saying, when it comes to hell, be afraid. Be very afraid. And quit goofing around with your life. This isn’t a game. Our choices will have consequences, like we better believe they will. Heaven awaits. God invites. Hell only awaits those who willfully and consistently reject the invitation. The invitation

requires an R.S.V.P. The R.S.V.P. is our life lived in responsive obedience to Jesus Christ. And need I remind us,(?) not to decide is to decide. In other words, if you never get around to making and acting on your decision, you made your decision. And God will let it stand. Bob Dylan once said, “He who isn’t busy being born, is busy dying.” So decide already, and if you decide to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, act on it. Everyday. From now on. Amen? Amen.