

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Heaven and Hell
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Revelation 20:11-21:4;
Luke 16:19-31

Heaven and hell. As I was preparing for this sermon I decided to see what people were thinking and reading about them. That led me to my online place of worship, Amazon. I typed hell into the search bar and got back 100,000 hits. In the top ten were [23 Minutes in Hell: One Man's Story about What He Saw, Heard, and Felt in that Place of Torment](#) and [Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We've Made Up](#) (which I have read). I then did the same for heaven, and two of the top ten out of the 300,000 results were [Visiting Heaven: Secrets of Life After Death](#) and [Heaven is Real](#). I think this tells us two things. First, that heaven is more popular than hell by a three-to-one margin. Second, it tells us that human beings are fascinated by concepts of heaven and hell and how they relate to life after death. And this is nothing new. Ever since some time in the Middle Ages people have been preaching about, writing about and painting about heaven and hell. One of the most vivid images of this is the judgment scene in the Sistine Chapel where there are graphic images of people going up to the bliss of heaven and down to the torment of hell. But this morning, I have to say I wonder what all the fuss is about, and I do so for two reasons.

The first reason is that heaven and hell are simply put, not all that important in the Bible. If they were characters in a movie, they would not be on screen long enough to be in the final credits. There would be no "heaven and hell played by themselves." Let's start with hell. Hell is not in the Old Testament at all. There is only a shadowy place called Sheol where all the dead, good and bad go. In the New Testament, Jesus mentions hell or hades, which may or may not be the same thing, no more than a handful of times. And even if you add in his mentions of things like the chaff being burned up in fire, we only add a few more instances of a fearful afterlife. As a focus of the New Testament it is dwarfed by love. Heaven, as a home in the afterlife, is even less used than hell. In the Old Testament, heaven is where God and the angels, but not humans, live. In the New Testament, there are only a couple of mentions of heaven being a place where the righteous go after death. So once again, heaven and hell as retirement locales, barely get a mention.

The second reason for wondering about all the fuss, is that scripture makes clear that heaven and hell are only temporary housing and not permanent retirement homes. I realize that for most Christians this comes as a shock. We have been taught for hundreds of years about these places either being the eternal home of good people, heaven, and the eternal home of bad people, hell. But this is not what scripture teaches us. First, heaven. Heaven, according to Revelation, as we read this morning heaven comes down to earth. In other words, the final locale for humanity is not a disembodied spiritual existence with God, but a bodily existence with God here on this earth. Which by the way is the point of Paul's great discourse on resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians. Now, hell. As we read this morning as well, hell is emptied out and then is thrown into the Lake of Fire where it is destroyed...sort of an after-life urban renewal. In other words, hell has a limited life span and will eventually be unnecessary. So why ought we to consider heaven and hell at all. The answer, scripture tells us, is that they remind us that the trajectories of our lives, matter in this life and in the next. Let me explain.

Scripture lays out two life trajectories. The first is the trajectory of loving God and neighbor. It is a trajectory of compassion, forgiveness and sharing. The second is a trajectory of loving self, more than God or others. It is a trajectory of greed, revenge and selfishness. I use the term trajectories because no one is either perfectly good or perfectly evil. Even so, our lives bend in one direction or the other. They arc toward God and neighbor, or they arc toward self. And the reason these trajectories matter (and this is the key) is that the trajectory we are on in this life is the trajectory we are continue into the next. Think about satellites. Some are launched with a low orbit trajectory, while others are launched with a high orbit trajectory. This is the what happens with the trajectories of our lives. A trajectory of loving God and neighbor launches us into a high orbit that brings us rest and peace in the presence of God. The trajectory of self-centeredness launches us a low orbit where we find distress as we live outside the presence of God. The terms heaven and hell, as Jesus uses them, are reminders that the trajectories of our lives in this life matter for our lives to come.

This is the point of the story in Luke 16. There are two characters, the rich man and Lazarus. Each has a different trajectory. The rich man had a trajectory of self-centeredness. He dressed in expensive clothes, had the best of everything and every day ate more than he needed. And then he would walk past Lazarus, not even sharing the scraps from his table. Even the dogs had more compassion that he did. The second character, Lazarus, had a trajectory in which he was totally dependent on God because he had no one else to turn to him. At death, their trajectories carried them into different orbits. The rich man went into a low orbit of distress and distance from God because of his trajectory of self-centeredness. Lazarus on the other hand is where he is because God has taken pity on him because his trajectory was that of dependence on God. And this story is not a stand-alone image of the outcome of these two trajectories. We see this every time Jesus speaks of hell, hades or fire. One of the most used is Jesus' story of the sheep and goats in which the ultimate destination of either a high or low orbit is determined by how one treated the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and those in prison, or as Jesus' puts it, the least of these. These stories are reminders to Jesus' listeners that our trajectories in this life matter in the next.

I realize that it might seem like an overwhelming task to set the right trajectory. Yet we do not set it alone. The triune God is there to help us. In God the Father, we have the one who calls us, woos us, loves us and urges us to take the high trajectory. God also gives us the manual of operations for what this trajectory looks like. Through the stories of the scriptures, the Law and Prophets. They describe the upper trajectory. In God the Son, in Jesus, we have the one who, as Hebrews puts it, is the pioneer and completer of our faith. In other words, in Jesus we have the one who has not only shown us what the trajectory looks like in his words and deeds, but we have the one, who in defeating the power of sin through his death and resurrection has made it possible for us to be high trajectory people. This means we not only see the upper trajectory clearly, but we can set our lives upon its path. Finally, in God the Spirit we have the one who becomes our navigator once the journey has begun. The Spirit goes with us, offering course corrections when our trajectory begins to veer off course. The Spirit thus ensures that we will reach our destination of peace, rest and presence. We have been given all of this because God's desire is the renewal of all of humanity...not just a few practically, perfect people.

The trajectories of our lives matter. They matter to those around us now and they matter to us in the future. My challenge to you then is this, as you go through your week, note how you spend your time, how you treat others and what you do with your money and then ask, what does my trajectory look like?