

WGUMC July 30, 2017 "the life everlasting"
Revelation 21:1-2; 22:1-5 and Luke 17:20-21

We all have our own version of hell. Cancer, kidney stones, political campaigns. We go through enough living hells, we don't have time to think about what might be waiting for us when we die.

But what about heaven? What is your picture of what the Apostles' Creed calls "the life everlasting"? In an old Rhymes with Orange cartoon, a dog asks a cat: "How long is eternity?" The cat answers, "Twelve hours." The dog says, "That's it?" The cat explains, "When people go to heaven they're supposed to reunite with their families for eternity. Twelve hours with their families is about the longest people can take."

So one picture of heaven (or hell, depending on how you look at it) is a big family reunion. Fortunately, the Bible gives us lots of other options. The Prophet Isaiah gives us the Animal Planet version of a peaceable kingdom where "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the

calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them." [Is 11:6]

By contrast, the Book of Revelation gives us a more urban, Trump Tower kind of vision. Heaven is a holy city, with pearly gates and golden streets. [Rev 21:21]

But when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he uses more earthy analogies. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman hides in a measure of flour. The kingdom of heaven is like a fisherman casting his net into the sea or a farmer sowing his field.

By using such ordinary things to talk about something that is quite extraordinary, Jesus shows us how absolutely anything can point us to heaven. All we have to do is look at it in the right way.

Jesus uses images that were familiar with the people of his time. But not many of us are farmers anymore. Not many of

us bake our own bread or catch our own fish. We need some new metaphors, and so over the years, this pastor has tried to preach some new parables.

One time I was doing the funeral of a woman whose two young sons were not members of any faith and, as far as I could tell, they were downright dismissive of their mother's Christian faith. One of them was working on his PhD in physics at UCSC. I didn't think he would be drawn to any picture of pearly gates or golden streets, so at the graveside, I tried out a different one.

In high school science you learn the laws of thermodynamics. The first one says that energy is never lost. Think of breathing. When you exhale, the energy that escapes your body in the form of heat may have left your body, but it will never leave this universe.

I happen to believe that our spirits are a form of energy. And just as there is a law for the conservation of energy, I

believe that there is a law for the conservation of spirit.

Someone's spirit is an energy that is never lost to us. Even though the body bearing it will die and disappear, the spirit of a person we have loved lives forever with us.

I didn't have to explain the science to the sons. I knew they would get it. I was just trying to use their language to explain everlasting life. Who knows? Someday they might believe it.

Perhaps physics isn't your thing, but for plenty of people around here, computers are. Maybe the mind of God for you is like an incredibly powerful and super sophisticated computer. Then eternal life is like having everything you think and feel, say and do, get stored forever in the unlimited memory of God. To some this idea of God may seem a tad impersonal; to technophobes, it is terrifying. Wouldn't you find it a little unsettling to discover that some engineers are actually working

on something like this? Someday, they want to make it possible to upload our brains to the cloud!

But thinking of ourselves as memories in the mind of God is actually biblical. Folks in the Bible ask God to remember them when they are in trouble. [Ps 25:7; 79:8; 106:4; Neh 5:19; 13:31; Job 10:9] For instance, the thief on the cross says to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."
[Luke 23:42]

The idea that God remembers us can be especially comforting to someone who is grieving the death of a loved one who was unable to remember anything. When I do a funeral for an Alzheimer's patient, I try to assure the family that even though their mother didn't recognize them, couldn't speak to them, and couldn't remember or appreciate that they had been there every single day for the past ten years, still nothing was lost. Everything their mother was, everything she experienced, every gift of love she received, every joy she had in being their

mother lives forever in the mind of God. You don't have to like computers to love that thought.

I know that not everyone in the valley is a math and science nerd, so the last picture of the kingdom of heaven that I'd like to paint for you is one that is suggested by our reading in Revelation today. In addition to the pearly gates and the golden streets, the holy city boasts a river of life and growing on either side of that river is the tree of life. The kingdom of heaven as a tree has been a very powerful image for me lately. One of the reasons I love spending time in trees is that they keep pointing me to God, the giver of life. And like any good parable of the kingdom, the trees teach me truth about eternal life.

For one thing, trees live a very long time. There is what they call a "clonal colony" of quaking aspens in central Utah that are all growing from the same root system that is estimated to be about 80,000 years old. While individual tree

trunks live and die, the roots they are connected to, live on.

We are like those quaking aspens. We are all the time living and dying, but if we stay rooted in God, we will live on and on.

Unfortunately, I've never seen the aspens in Utah, but I did see lots of Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce, Western Red Cedar, and Western Hemlock while hiking in Olympic National Park a few weeks ago. The park is in temperate rainforest where there is more life and death per square foot than almost anywhere on earth.

In this forest, there are as many fallen logs as standing trees, and sometimes it's hard to tell them apart. That's because when a big tree falls down and dies, it becomes an excellent cradle for new life. They call these dead trees "nurse logs." As their wood decays, the logs provide some lucky seeds with all the essential nutrients they need to sprout and grow new trees. Eventually, the dead logs rot away leaving the living trees looking as if they were standing on their tiptoes. But we

know that they are really standing on the shoulders of giants. This is one of the ways that a grand old tree passes on its legacy. This is one way that nature teaches us a lesson about eternity.

Think of the people in your life who were nurse logs for you, who gave you the nourishment you needed to grow. When they left you, they left a hole in your heart the shape of their love. But really, they didn't leave you at all, because they live on in you. In a way, they have everlasting life through you.

Now there are other lessons that trees can teach us about eternity. There are other ways that dead trees can nurture live ones. In the redwood forests where we live, we often see mother trees surrounded by their babies. The mother tree will one day die, but she will keep living. She will transfer her energy in the form of carbon to her offspring. Through her root system, she will give life to them as well as to other nearby trees, even if they are of an entirely different species.

So you see, nature has its own traditions of inheritance. This final gift of life is a mother tree's last will and testament both for her children and for her community.

How many of you have a written will? Is it a document designed to give life? Have you included in it gifts of your wisdom as well as your wealth? What gift of everlasting value can you give to your children and to your community? Have you made provisions to pass on your faith as well as your finances? The tree of life in the Book of Revelation had leaves that were for the healing of the nations. And that makes me wonder what we can leave behind that will bring healing to our little corner of God's creation.

I don't know if any of these parables of the kingdom work for you, but I share them with you because I want to encourage you to look for the signs of the kingdom that are literally all around you. Heaven is not far off. In fact, you don't even have

to die to get there. As Jesus said to his disciples, "the kingdom of God is among you." God is here. Jesus is with us.

To John Wesley that meant that we can live in heaven in the here and now. Believers live in eternity and walk in eternity. That's because, in the words of Catherine of Siena, "All the way to heaven is heaven." So if you just open your eyes and see, open your ears to hear, open your minds to know, and open your hearts to believe in the everlasting life, you will discover that you are already living it. Giving thanks to God, let's proclaim it. [The Apostles' Creed]