

Revelation 5: 11-13; 7: 9-17
Creekside COB
November 1, 2008

“Our Destination and Vocation”

This morning I will preach a sermon unlike any I’ve preached before. You’re probably thinking, “Hooray! We’re *finally* going to hear a good one!” What makes this sermon different is that it has two subtitles. There wasn’t room in the bulletin for all of it, so here it is if you want to pencil it in: *“Our Destination and Our Vocation: Our Journey and Our Arrival, and A Conversation With a Life Insurance Salesman.”*

I’ll start with the insurance salesman. In an effort to “connect” with me he said, “You know, pastor, our professions have a lot in common.” Not wanting to cause a scene I obliged and replied, “Really?” “We both sell a product.” “I’ve never thought about ministry as *product* before.” I told him. “And I don’t get commissions.” “Look at it this way, pastor. Our challenge is to get people to buy something they won’t need until they die.”

I thought, “Where was this guy four years ago? I could have saved lots of time, work, and expense in seminary studying scripture, theology, church history, preaching, counseling, and pastoral care.” If I had known ministry was a sales job I could have gotten by with a couple courses in persuasive sales techniques and made a living selling tickets to heaven!”

I did not purchase a policy from “Joe the Insurance Guy.” I did not, and certainly do not see the sole purpose of the Christian faith as an insurance policy to get to heaven. But I’m sorry to say that this is the most prevalent impression people have of Christianity. It is a means to an end. Life in this world is something you “get through” as best you can. Your pay-off comes after you die and your beneficiaries divvy up your insurance money.

Jesus' promised the thief on the cross, "You will be with me in paradise," It's a promise to all who walk in his way. With Paul I say, "If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is futile," (1 Cor. 15: 16-17). In unison I say with Paul, "Eyes have not seen, ears have not heard, and human hearts have not conceived the glorious things that await those who are in Christ. But we cannot reduce the gospel to an evacuation plan from our sin-sick, God-forsaken planet.

From the beginning of Christianity in Ireland, the Celtic Christians did not believe there was an unbridgeable gulf between heaven and earth. They believed the physical and spiritual realm "touched" each other. Only a thin, porous veil separated them. Heaven was not a place light years away. They believed that glimpses of heaven could be seen, experiences of heaven could be felt, and God's Kingdom had a foothold on earth as it is in heaven.

There's a verse from a song from the Steve Miller Band that says, "*You've got to go through hell before you get to heaven.*" But for those who have come to know that God is near and here, life as hell-on-earth isn't necessarily so. The medieval Christian mystic, Catherine of Sienna said, "All the way to heaven is heaven." Discipleship cannot be reduced to an exercise in delayed gratification. We do not have to wait a lifetime for our heavenly reward. We can have a foretaste and "live into" the reward now.

In Revelation 5 John has an epic vision that takes place before the throne of God and Jesus, "the Lamb." It is a big crowd--myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands; wave upon wave of every person and creature in heaven and earth. *ALL* creation is there—everything that ever lived and lives, everything that has been or will be is singing. A vast choir made of humans, whales, wolves, whippoorwills, and wombats sings in perfect harmony: "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing,*" (Rev. 5: 12). It is a diverse choir, and most of it's members wouldn't be considered choir material.

The southern writer Flannery O'Connor created the character, Mrs. Turpin, a self-assured, self-righteous, sanctimonious Christian who prided herself being several steps above the ugly, lunatic, white trash crowd. Mrs. Turpin had a frightening experience. In the doctor's office waiting room she provoked a young woman who tried to strangle Mrs. Turpin, calling her a "*wart hog from hell.*" Back home as she slopped the hogs, Mrs. Turpin had a vision of a brilliant, fiery bridge coming from the pigpen and reaching to heaven:

A vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. Whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of lunatics shouting, clapping and leaping like frogs.

Bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself... always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.

They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable, as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away," (Best Sermons 1, page 22).

Mrs. Turpin saw *the communion of saints*-- an "inclusive communion" made up of the likely, unlikely, and least likely. It is the communion of the dearly departed we loved. Look close and you will see Kenny and Connie, Kathe, and Kathy. You'll see Ralph and Don, and Ray and Mignon, and Janet and Hal. They crossed the finish line. The saints have "*gone marching in*" to their reward.

But here is something to consider. Look in a Bible concordance you will find the word heaven 610 times. It must be very

important to warrant so many references. Yet hardly a handful of them relate to destiny after death. Heaven is when God gets when God wants on earth. Heaven is when the perfect creation which human sin broke is put back together. In Romans 8 Paul says, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, and not only creation, but we ourselves while we wait for redemption."

Who is responsible for creating the outposts of heaven here on earth? That would be you.

On Friday, Betty Kelsey and I joined 250 others who heard Father Richard Rohr. He is a man of remarkable spiritual depth, and one of the insights I took with me is -- "God is not *out there*." God does not reside in a corner of the cosmos where God will stay until the curtain call. Father Rohr says, "God only occupies 3" at the top of our bodies. God is stored in our brains as a set of *passed-along, hashed-over beliefs* or a *vague, fuzzy ideal* that has nothing to do with the rest of our lives.

Before you forget most of what I say, check out Revelation 7: 15 and 16. Notice a difference in tense between, "For this reason *they are* before the throne of God and worship him day and night..." and "*They will* hunger or thirst no more..." The followers of Jesus will inherit.

Heaven is our hope. But as the reformer John Calvin said about our speculations, "It is foolish and rash to inquire about unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know."

A new pastor who moved to town. After the family settled in and his office was together he drove around to get familiar with the places he would frequent. He found every thing except the post office, so he pulled to the curb, rolled down his window and asked the paperboy, "Where is the post office? "Go three blocks, turn left, and go one block," he said. The pastor thanked him and said, "Come to church this Sunday and I'll tell you how to get to heaven." With a puzzled look the boy replied, "*How can*

you show me the way to heaven when you can't find the post office?"

As we thank God for the saints who have shown us the way, let's ask God for power to do heaven's work right here. We ask God whose being surrounds us and whose Spirit dwells within us to grant us hope.

We have no business biding our time and idling our lives away waiting for our payoff. If we were meant for heaven alone, God wouldn't have gone to the bother of creating the earth and putting us here. Apparently there is a reason. There is business to tend to here. Saints are needed.

It is our work to tend to here. And trust God to tend to hereafter.