

Heaven on Earth

In the name of him who prayed that we may be with him always, dear friends in Christ: What do you think? Wouldn't it be nice to have, just once in a while, a taste of heaven here on earth – to be able to experience in the here and now just a bit of what we will be enjoying for all eternity? In this fallen world of ours beset by so many problems and sorrows, what could be better than that? Well, it happens that imaginative people have thought it possible. From the culinary world, for example, there are certain foods that claim to provide a taste of heaven. For instance, there are a variety of dishes called “Ambrosia”; which, in Greek mythology was the food of the gods. I've tasted a few of them, and, quite frankly, I was disappointed. They definitely failed to deliver. Then we have angel hair pasta and angel food cake, which are okay, I guess; but hardly heavenly. And now there's a fast food outfit that makes a sandwich they bill as “heaven on a bun” (which is odd because there's no bun in this particular sandwich. Instead they substitute two boneless fried chicken breasts for the bread, and in between they stuff slabs of bacon, cheese, and a creamy, calorie-laden sauce. I'm pretty sure they call it what they do because if you eat one it'll clog the arteries in your heart and it's to heaven you'll be going very soon—unless, of course, you're headed the other way, in which case they might just as well call their sandwich “hell on a bun”; but that probably wouldn't sell as well, would it?). No, I think that people who describe any food however delicious as a taste of heaven have a much uninspired view of what heaven will be.

But if food can't deliver, there are some *places* that have been described as heaven on earth – usually by travel agents who want to book you a trip there. “It's a tropical paradise”, they'll tell you. And when they say that, the chances are high that it's also a tourist trap; and there's nothing heavenly about that. As it happens, I did live for a while in a place that could be described as a tropical paradise that was relatively unspoiled. There were coconut trees, pristine, white sandy beaches, exotic tropical fruits and birds ... and there were also dread jungle diseases, crushing poverty and widespread malnutrition among the local populace, giant flying cockroaches, and these vicious ten-inch caterpillars that could spit caustic venom at you from several feet away. Nothing heavenly about that. On the other hand, some of you who have lived *here* for several generations might think of life on the Iowa plains as a sort of paradise, especially when everything is green and warm, and the fields are heavy with the promise of a bountiful harvest. The image of this place being heaven on earth, however, is shattered when one is exposed to the weather in the winter ... *and* the summer ... *and* most of the spring. So, no, whatever place we might call paradise on earth will always fall far short of the mark. As they say: in this world, even the prettiest rose has thorns.

But we're not done trying yet. It has been the lofty goal of various groups throughout history to create an earthly paradise in the sense of the perfect society. It's an experiment that has been tried over and over again especially when this country was younger and utopian dreamers from Europe would come here with their followers and try to set up the ideal community. Such were the Shakers, the Moravians, the Millerites, and many others. Brook Farm, Massachusetts; New Harmony, Indiana; Oneida, New York were all started as communal colonies in which the members really believed they could bring heaven to earth. Why, just east of nearby Corning there was a group called the Icarians. They had a settlement that prospered briefly during the time of the Civil

War; but there's nothing left of it now except a marker beside the road. That's the same fate suffered by all the other attempts to create a perfect community; they all failed. And they share something else in common. They all thought that if you could just come up with the right set of rules and get everyone to agree to them, then they could achieve what they were striving for. What they failed to recognize is that to have the perfect society, you need to have people who can keep rules perfectly. Such people don't exist; they don't obey the rules. But instead of identifying the real problem – the sinfulness of man – and blaming people for breaking the rules, they all figured the problem must be that they hadn't yet quite hit upon the right set of rules just yet. All they just needed to do was to make some adjustments and add a few more rules—which they did over time. And before long, life in these colonies became more like prison than paradise. The members got discouraged, gave up, and left.

The bottom line in all this is that as much as we might like to have a taste of heaven here on earth, there is no food or experience devised by man, no perfect place in the world, and no ideal society that can possibly provide it. There is simply no way for fallen man to bring heaven to earth, even if just for a moment.

There was a time, however, when paradise *did* exist on this earth. The garden of God into which our first parents were placed was indeed perfection in every sense of the term. The Lord God designed it to be that way for us. It had all we could ever need or desire. And because it was free of the taint of sin, and people lived there in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation, it really was heaven on earth. It was lost, as you know, when our first parents fell into sin. Then this world, its inhabitants, and all creatures great and small became subject to the curse. Mankind was expelled from paradise. And we've never known it any other way. But there is in each one of us a longing, a deep almost inexpressible desire to return to the home that we never knew through personal experience; but that we still have the sense of having lost. I mean, we look around this world and see its problems, struggles, suffering, and sorrows – we know them first hand – and we recognize that things ought not to be this way. The reason we have this sense is that we still feel the loss. And this is why we long for a taste of heaven on earth – even though there is no earthly way for us to have it.

We can't reach up to pull a bit of heaven down; *but the Lord God, by bending low, can deliver it to us.* And he does. This is what today's reading from Revelation is about. It describes a time when things will be restored – when heaven and earth will be united once again, when paradise will exist on this world. St. John, in his vision, sees the throne of God and of the Lamb on earth. His throne is the place where the Lord lives with his people, and the seat of authority from which he rules. And from his throne flows the River of the Water of Life. It's like the first Garden in which a huge spring came up from the ground and flowed forth in four directions to water and give life to all the earth. That's what is going on here. It shows how the Lord himself is the source and sustainer of all life. And here too John sees the Tree of Life in the garden. It bears the fruit that, if one eats, he lives forever. And not just one kind of fruit. Instead we're told that this marvelous tree bears twelve different crops throughout the year – a different fruit for every month, which means it's always in production. And that tells us something else: that eating the fruit of the Tree of Life is an ongoing thing. Even in paradise people need to eat from the tree and drink from the River of the Water of Life. *That's* how they live forever. They are not immortal in and of themselves. They are never independent of God; rather their eternal lives always depend upon the Lord and his gifts of mercy. That is mankind's proper relationship with the Creator. Remember, what got us into trouble in

the first place was thinking we could be independent of him and be gods in our own right. In paradise restored, we won't have that silly idea. We'll finally understand that we depend upon the Lord for everything, and with humble hearts full of gratitude we will praise and worship him for providing it.

And we will see him there, face to face. His name will be on our foreheads, marking us as his sons and daughters – members of his royal family, and heirs of his eternal kingdom. And in the endless day of the light that shines from his face, we will reign with him forever and ever.

When will it be? When can we have this taste of heaven on earth? The answer may surprise you. That's because it's not in some hazy undetermined future; rather it's happening right now – at this very moment, to be precise. Really, it is. This is what our weekly worship here in the church is all about. It's about the Triune God who rules over all the universe bending down low to be with us right here – just as he used to walk and talk with our first parents in the garden in cool of the day. It's here that he comes to us and speaks to us through his Word. And here he has his throne: it's the pulpit and lectern from which he speaks, the font from which flows the River of the Water of Life, and the altar from which we receive, all throughout the months and seasons of the church year, the fruit of the Tree of Life—for the fruit that gives eternal life is the body and blood of Christ, and the tree is the cross upon which he was slain for our sins. These together are the throne of God and of the Lamb on the earth, and from which we receive our taste of heaven in the here and now.

This is where his light shines in the darkness of this world. This is where he places his name on our foreheads in Holy Baptism and makes us his children and heirs. This is where we see his kind face turned to us in the face of Christ crucified. And here too is the place where he deals with the one big problem that all those who tried to create the perfect society on earth failed to address: our sin. In the vision John hears a voice say, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life ...". Who are they? *They* are those who confess their sins and receive Christ's Word of forgiveness. That's what cleanses their robes and covers their shame. They are the ones who are able to eat at the Lord's Table. Who's on the outside? Who is not allowed to eat? Those who refuse to repent of their sins: "the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood". As long as they refuse to repent of such sins, they remain on the outside. But the door is open for them to repent and return – and not just here, but every place in this world where the Triune God brings heaven to earth through the ministry of his holy Church.

And in this holy Church he knits us together by his Spirit in one faith and one communion to be the holy Bride promised to Christ, who waits with eager anticipation the day when he will come to take her to be his own forever. Then the taste of heaven we have on earth only intermittently and incompletely now will become the full-fledged eternal wedding feast.

And so, if you will, you might think about what we do here on a typical Sunday as sort of like a wedding rehearsal. I've done a couple dozen weddings by now, and each time we've had the rehearsal the day before. And they all work out pretty much the same way. We show people what to do, where to stand, who comes in when and does what. No one is dressed up like they will be the next day. And there's a certain

artificiality and awkwardness about it all, along with some joking and clowning around. It's all very informal.

But when I have the couple rehearse their vows, suddenly it gets very serious. As they look into each other's eyes and repeat the promises they will soon be making to love, honor, and cherish one another for a lifetime – and they sense the gravity of what they are about to do, and the depth of the love they have for one another ... well, even though they aren't married yet, it all becomes very real. A wonderful moment passes between them.

Let me suggest that something very similar happens in our worship. It isn't the wedding just yet. There's a clumsiness to it, an awkwardness. Our hymn singing doesn't sound like heavenly choirs. There's noise and distractions all around. Our hearts and minds wander. Our robes are still stained with sin even though we've washed them over and over again. It doesn't look like paradise in here. And sorry, Pastor, but your sermons are anything but heavenly. But despite it all, Christ our Bridegroom is here with us. And where he is, heaven has come to earth. And when he speaks his promises to us, when he washes us by his Word and Spirit, and when we eat his body and drink his blood given for the forgiveness of our sins, we do indeed have a very real taste of heaven on earth. And this ought to make us truly appreciate the moments we have here, and to hunger even more for the glory to be revealed when Christ our Lord comes to take us to home.

Small wonder then, that the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come". Even so, let all of us who hear say, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." In his holy name.

Soli Deo Gloria!