

Beyond Heaven and Hell

1 Kings 19:9-14

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The anthem "Canticle of Hope" just completed was created in 1995 and written for and dedicated to the people of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It was in response to the bombing of the downtown Federal Building there in April of that year.

I find that the words of the anthem, especially "you are the God who restores," extremely meaningful when I revisit what it must have been like for people in and around that event. The statistics are that 168 people were killed, 680 were injured, 86 cars were destroyed, and 324 other buildings were damaged in the explosion.

And there is that iconic picture of the dying child Baylee Almon, being gently held by firefighter Chris Fields, which was on the cover of every magazine across the globe. Even though that picture has haunted and changed the lives of the surviving single mother, the firefighter, and the photographer forever; amidst all of the grief it is good to know that the mother has found some comfort in the knowledge that her child was cradled and not alone after the tragedy.

That picture – and the feelings that we experience with it – goes far deeper than any words that can be offered as explanation or consolation. Whatever we feel about things like the topic of the day – heaven and hell, or even Father's Day for that matter – are most often expressed through music or art to a deeper level than words ever do. For whatever reason a picture or an anthem can truly pierce the heart.

An example of hell must have been April 19, 1995 in downtown Oklahoma City. An example of heaven might be what is there now. Last summer on sabbatical I visited the Oklahoma City National Memorial administered by the National Parks Service. It is a reflective and quiet and I would even venture "sacred" space on the site of that explosion, with the well known 168 "empty chairs" and the lone "survivor tree."

Ideas and images of heaven and hell are all around us in both popular culture and sacred literature. In the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, heaven is a place where God and the angels reside. But there is not yet the idea that it is the place where the righteous go when they die, nor is there the familiar concept of hell as it is known today. Rather, "Sheol" is a place where people go after they die – good and bad. In most references to Sheol, it is not clear that beings have any consciousness there; it was simply the "abode of the dead." In the New Testament the word is translated as "Hades" and it refers to the continuing concept of Sheol as well as the god of Hades and the underworld in Greek mythology. And when the conquering Romans who were the next players on the world stage came along, the god Hades became the god Pluto. The writings that later were collected to form the Bible's New Testament, however, were written in Greek – so the word Hades remained.

There is also a common belief of a physical resurrection of the dead in more traditional practices across religions. One clear example of that for me is seen in the Kidron Valley that separates the walled Old City of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. In that valley there are two cemeteries facing each other – one Jewish and one Muslim. In Hebrew the name means “where God will judge” and the two cemeteries are literally facing off, each with the belief that God will physically restore the inhabitants of that cemetery (but only them – how convenient) at some point in the future.

But Christians aren’t exempt from a “convenient” analysis, either. By the time of the New Testament, heaven is starting to assume the idea of a paradise where the righteous go to be with God when they die. Across cultures and history and denominations – too often the “righteous” are seen as the people who look, think, act, and believe like me. Sadly, the term “righteous” too often really means “self-righteous.”

And as the concept of hell develops more fully, there is an awful lot of emphasis on the details. The devil, or Satan, emerges as part of the concept. And there is no shortage of commentary. Maybe the best known is the medieval epic poem, curiously named The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri which describes in detail nine circles of suffering that are called the “Inferno,” or the Italian word for hell.

The concept of heaven also develops over this time, but it never seems to garner the same level of attention as hell, probably because it hasn’t been used by the church as a threat, a withholding of forgiveness, or as such an effective tool to reinforce guilt or shame.

One of my favorite secular dialogues about heaven comes from the 1989 film “Field of Dreams.” On the surface it is almost a comic interchange, but on a deeper level it is a poignant one – a conversation between father and son – after the father has died. It is both a throwback to a more innocent time when the father was a young man as well as acknowledging the never-resolved later estrangement between that father and son. The dialogue is between Ray (actor Kevin Costner) and John (actor Dwier Brown) Kinsella:

John (the father): “Is this heaven?”

Ray (the son): “It’s Iowa.”

John: “Iowa? I could have sworn this was heaven.”

[John starts to walk away]

Ray: “Is there a heaven?”

John: “Oh yeah. It’s the place where dreams come true.”

[Ray looks around, seeing his wife playing with their daughter on the porch]

Ray: “Maybe this is heaven.”

Even though we are surrounded by secular attempts to understand heaven and hell, I have to confess that I haven’t given a lot of energy over to the Christian theology or the reality of heaven and hell over the years of being a church pastor. It honestly hasn’t been one of the top questions that I have received over time. And I was prepared to be stumped when

picking out a single Bible passage on this subject. But when I read the lectionary passage already selected for today (if I chose to use it) it felt spot on.

Elijah, even though he is running for his life (or maybe because of it) manages to say over and over again how “zealous” he has been for God. “Hey God, remember how good I’ve been on judgment day” is the implied message. And then comes an experience that is really pretty amazing because it feels so right:

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

“Sheer silence.” That is where Elijah finally finds God.

And sheer silence is as good an example as any about what we truly know regarding heaven and hell. Yes there are Biblical references, but no one who has ever been there has come back to tell us about it, write a guidebook, or produce a best-selling Heaven and Hell for Dummies reference book. There has been quite a lot of interest in the “Life after Life” books authored by those who have researched near death experiences. Some are comforted by the belief that this supports the reality of heaven, while others scoff at this being a simple biological reality of the brain being deprived of oxygen.

And there is the classic book On Life after Death by the late psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler Ross who is best known for proposing five stages of grief around death and dying. It is as good a book as any at bridging science and faith. In her work and experience with the dying she developed concepts that included that the body was a mere shell (or cocoon) that we outgrow to evolve into the next level of existence as a spirit (or butterfly). For her, the purpose of life on earth was to learn and grow through hard lessons and choices, and that the most important lesson of all was that of unconditional love.

And that – a personal attempt at making sense out of it all out of our own belief and experience – is what it finally comes down to for all of us.

Thirty two years ago I had the one dream that I can ever recall having about hell. I was on a college semester abroad in the Middle East. Several of us had come down with amoebic dysentery and we were in a “mission” hospital in the Palestinian territory on the West Bank of the Jordan. There were British nurses on staff by day and French nuns at night. It was a long time ago and it is a hazy memory because of being so sick (and maybe due to the treatment because later we were told that the standard one was opium). But one night I woke up to a sharp pain in my hand. The IV tube had emptied and the blood was dry around the Heparin Lock where it was attached to my hand. A nun was holding my hand and flicking the lock with her finger to try and break up the dried blood. Well, after a bit of a struggle, my memory is that I hit her... and that she ran out of the room screaming. I tried to deny it all but my roommate had a great story and the British nurses kept giggling whenever they were around me the next day.

But the dream from that night was that I was on a department store escalator going down into a black hole. I passed by a few museum-type exhibits – one was Jim Jones (of the Jonestown mass suicides in Guyana – it was 1978), and then the Boston Strangler, and then Jack the Ripper, and then Hitler. I was on an escalator to hell and it didn't look good for me by noting whom I had already descended below. Maybe Dante's "Inferno" influenced me more than I realized. I've shaken that fear, but still carry a little clench in my stomach whenever I see the illustrations of the nun in the children's book Madeline.

Now maybe my dream of "descending into hell" is not the best example, due to illness and treatment and the guilt of the moment. But I do believe that our dreams often put us in touch with the unfinished places in our lives. They are a connection to the sacred. And maybe they are even God being in touch with us in creative ways.

I've been far more aware of this when I've dreamed of heaven. And those dreams have consistently been around my daughter Lauren. They also represent a longing for what has never happened for her in this life – in my dreams she is walking and talking. This past spring there was a 48-hour period when her health suddenly declined, and then just as suddenly was regained. But for that period of time it wasn't clear if she would survive. Both nights I dreamed of her. The first dream we were walking hand-in-hand in a park. Nothing specific – just a hazy feeling of contentment. And the second dream we were sitting across a table sipping Frappuccinos at a Starbucks – who knew that heaven is a Starbucks coffee house! And in that dream Lauren is doing all the talking. Everything that she never got to say in this lifetime is being said, and I have all the time in the world to listen.

And that – a personal attempt at making sense out of it all out of our own belief and experience – is what it finally comes down to for all of us. Like the anthem "A Canticle of Hope," I believe in a "God who restores." I believe that one of the gifts of what comes next – no matter what we call it – is that the "old scores that we want settled" won't matter to us anymore.

Some of the last words of Jesus run counter to those themes of punishment and vengeance. In the Gospel of Luke (23:39-43) Jesus is on the cross with two thieves, also being crucified, on either side. One is bitter and derisive, but the other thief asks "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" The response? "*Truly I tell you; today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

And that is what I believe about heaven. An end to suffering. A place of peace and fulfillment. No old scores to settle. No vengeance. Maybe even moving from cocoon to butterfly. And ultimately a place of forgiveness. Just earlier in the narrative from Luke (23:34), and hanging from the cross, Jesus also said "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" May we hold onto the words from today's anthem?

"Great is thy faithfulness. You are the God who restores." Amen.

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At that place Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”