

“Heaven Is Here!”
Rev. Bill Freeman
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Menifee United Church of Christ

St. Peter is at the Pearly Gates. A woman comes up. St. Peter says, “Welcome to Heaven!” St. Peter says, “All you have to do to get into Heaven is spell a word correctly. The word you have to spell correctly is love.” The woman says, “Oh, that’s easy. L-O-V-E.” St. Peter says, “Very good. You may enter Heaven. But before you do, could you do me a favor? I have an errand to run. Could you sit here and welcome people into Heaven and give them the word test and, if they pass the word test, let them into Heaven?” The woman said, “Sure, no problem.” A little while later, her ex-husband shows up. She says, “Welcome to Heaven! All you have to do to get into Heaven is spell a word correctly.” She says, “The word you have to spell is Czechoslovakia.”

Heaven is probably a place that we’ve all thought about. And probably we have questions about. Does Heaven exist? Will I get to Heaven? What will Heaven be like? Will I see relatives that have passed on before? Will I see famous people that have passed on before, like Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, Ted Williams? Will I see God in Heaven? I can answer all those questions in just three simple words: I don’t know. But I have read several books about near-death experiences, people who say they’ve died and gone to Heaven and then come back to tell about it or write books about it. They say yes, you will see relatives that have passed on before. And in Heaven you’ll feel this constant feeling of love. And you will see God or you’ll see Jesus in Heaven. That’s what Heaven will be like when we get to Heaven and that’s why I believe in Heaven. Heaven is a far-off, distant place. But maybe it’s not that far-off.

John the Baptist says Heaven is close by. John the Baptist is an interesting character. He is apparently the second cousin of Jesus because Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, are first cousins, so, apparently, Jesus and John the Baptist are second cousins. You may remember that when Mary came to visit Elizabeth when she was pregnant, when John the Baptist, in Elizabeth’s womb, heard Mary’s voice, he leaped for joy in her womb. Later on, John the Baptist would be a voice crying in the wilderness. He would make the way straight for Jesus’ ministry. He would baptize people in the Jordan River, including Jesus, and tell people, according to Matthew, chapter 3, “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” What does that mean exactly, “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”? Well it may mean that Jesus, who comes from Heaven, has come to Earth, and therefore the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. If it means that I think it also means that Heaven is all around us if we can just have eyes to see it. It’s not just somewhere over the rainbow, it’s somewhere under the rainbow as well.

The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade I think is Heaven on Earth, at least for little kids. The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade – my daughter and I have watched that together every year for many years. We did again this year, as long as together means that she watched it on TV in Washington, DC and I watched it on TV here in California. My daughter makes fun of me because I always called it the Macy’s Day Parade. She would say, “No, Dad, it’s the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade!” Anyway, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade is 90 years old, although it started 92 years ago, but they took two years off during World War II. The Parade starts at Central Park in New York City and ends up on 34th Street in front of Macy’s Department Store. At the end of the Parade, of course, is Santa Claus, and I’ve got to believe that, for children, who see Santa Claus, it’s Heaven on Earth for them. Unfortunately, Heaven on Earth is not everywhere.

Ferguson, Missouri was not a place that was Heaven on Earth a couple of years ago. Ferguson, Missouri is a town Kathleen and I drove to on our way out here to California two and a half years ago from Michigan. I wanted to stop in Ferguson, Missouri because it was just a few days after the killing of Michael Brown, who was an unarmed African American killed by a white police officer. When we went through Ferguson, Missouri, people were protesting and I decided to walk with them. We walked and we held up our hands and said, “Hands up, don’t shoot! Hands up, don’t shoot!” It was at the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement signifies that African Americans are being killed and it’s a demonstration of racism in America that still exists. It also demonstrates that Heaven on Earth has not yet come to every place. Also, on the other hand, in Dallas, this past summer, five police officers were shot and killed trying to protect people at a Black Lives Matter movement rally.

Hundreds of hundred-dollar bills are given out every Christmastime, and I think that demonstrates Heaven on Earth. Let me explain. An anonymous donor, I believe in the Midwest, a rich, retired businessman, gives poor people hundred-dollar bills in December. I’ve seen stories about this every year for the past several years on the CBS Evening News. Maybe you’ve seen it, too. He gives hundred-dollar bills to people in need. They are so grateful, often they break down and cry because he’s just given them their Christmas. He’s like a boss who gives a Christmas bonus. He’s like an Ebenezer Scrooge after his overnight conversion. He’s like Santa Claus, giving out their Christmas presents a little early. And I’ve got to believe that when they get that hundred-dollar bill, for those people in need, it’s Heaven on Earth.

Henry David Thoreau lived in Heaven on Earth, at least for a couple of years. Henry David Thoreau, the essayist, poet, and philosopher, wrote several books, including Civil Disobedience. He wrote that probably after he was arrested for not paying his taxes. It's about how the individual relates to the State. Gandhi and Dr. King were inspired by that book in their non-violent protests. Henry David Thoreau also lived for two years near Walden Pond. That's when he wrote the book Walden, his most famous work. Henry David Thoreau seems to know that Heaven on Earth exists. He wrote, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads." I believe that's true. You just have to have eyes to see it.

What do we do to promote, to create, Heaven on Earth? Well, this church, as has been mentioned, will have a Christmas Tea next Saturday at 2:00 pm. We'll have a little food and people are asked to bring an unwrapped new toy which will be given to children at Survival Ministries. I have to believe that for them, when they get that new toy, that will be Heaven on Earth. Also, we're collecting food for Survival Ministries so that people can have a Christmas dinner and hopefully other dinners. So if you can bring in some food for our food collection, we will give that to Survival Ministries about a week before Christmas. I believe that for them, that will create Heaven on Earth, as much as we can.

Los Lonely Boys had a hit song a few years ago about Heaven. The song was simply titled "Heaven." Los Lonely Boys sing: How far is Heaven? Lord, can you tell me? How far is Heaven? I just gotta know, I just wanna know, how far is Heaven? I think we all want to know - how far is Heaven? Hopefully Heaven above is many, many, many years from now for us. But also, Heaven on Earth, hopefully, is not far at all. I think here is Heaven on Earth. When I see that it's snowy and 36 degrees back in Michigan and I look out and it's about 70 degrees and sunny here, I believe we're living in Heaven on Earth.

But what do we do to create Heaven on Earth? I believe if we have love in our hearts, if we offer love to others, we're creating Heaven on Earth. When we help others in need, we're creating Heaven on Earth. When we comfort people who are in pain, or at least try to, we're in Heaven on Earth. Whatever we can do for others helps create Heaven on Earth. While it may not be easy to try to create Heaven on Earth, it's a lot better than living in Hell on Earth. When we're living in Heaven on Earth, I think it's a joyous thing. And to get there we don't even have to spell Czechoslovakia.

Let us pray:

*God of Love, help us to live in Heaven on Earth.
Help us to help others to live in Heaven on Earth.
And help us to create Heaven on Earth for everyone.
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
And in the name of Jesus,
Amen.*

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*