

Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Jesus is clear that Moses gave the Israelites bread for their stomachs, but he insists that those who have followed him hunger for the true bread from God which comes down from *heaven*. What do we think of heaven these days? *Do* we think of heaven? Our concepts about heaven are always evolving, from years B. C. to the twenty-first. From St. Bede and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, through Bunyan and Shelley (in a poem about Keats Lucinda can recite by heart). Bunyan writes in *The Pilgrim's Progress* about Christian's journey to heaven, from here to there, about turbulent bodies of water and other travails.

But we are not to fear. He quotes Isaiah. *When thou passest through the Waters, I will be with thee; and through the Rivers, they shall not overflow thee.*

The fears these writers formulate are generated by a universe of spirits some malign, some benign. Birth is a downward fall; the return journey is a complicated and dangerous ordeal, gatekeepers blocking the way to our ascent. Heaven is up there, we are down here. Western religions adopted the hierarchical picture of heaven, so some of us still think of heaven as up.

Dante and Jung, Bunyan and Bede give us different versions of the journey but agree on one thing: to prepare for the journey is one of

life's most pressing goals. After the journey, there is rest and refreshment. Bunyan writes of a blissful welcome: It is

. . .as if Heaven itself was come down to meet them. . .Trumpeters, even with Joyful sound. . .how welcome they were into their company, and with what gladness they came to meet them . . .They were . . .swallowed up with the sight of the Angels, and with hearing of their melodious tones.

We can be cheered or scared to death when we read these accounts. What we want of heaven, I think, is to envision *where* our loved ones are, *where* we will be. We want to know what it is people are seeing at the very threshold of leaving their bodies, as they cross over either silently or with joyful smiles on their faces; we ask little children to draw pictures of heaven. Often it comes down to describing a place. Nonetheless, the language of time and space implies an assurance of being rather than nothingness. Not everyone could penetrate, as Dante did, the theological thickets that separate this realm of substance from whatever insubstantial realm lies beyond the grave. Most poets assumed some kind of somewhere else, that death opens and one goes into as into a place.

Where and what is this place Jesus speaks of that can give life to the world?

The history of heaven in the West begins with the Bible. The heavens of the ancient Hebrews, created out of primordial chaos, form a vast watery sky-dome, supported by massive pillars and covering the earth.

Rain falls down from the open windows of the firmament; stars shine through it; God dwells enthroned within it, or perhaps beyond it. The prophets of Israel visit heaven in visions, dreams, even in bodily ascents.

Many descriptions of heaven come from visions: from a 7th century abbot of Iona, of wisdom and radiance and plenty; from the well-known vision of Paul, like a near-death experience, in which he is caught up in heaven and can hear the angels speaking. There is a lot of white linen and marvelous music. In Hildegarde of Bingen's vision, there is *air purer than the clearest water with a brightness beyond the brightness of the sun. Blowing air that contained all the greenness of the herbs and flowers of both paradise and earth, its aroma the sweetest.*

There are, in the accounts of a visual heaven, birds and trees, garlands and conchs; grass the color of peacock's necks. Many accounts enumerate precious jewels. I must say I am not much enthralled by gems or gold here on earth and descriptions of heaven as paved in them leave me cold.

Less soothing always is the journey itself. In graves scattered throughout southern Italy, Thessaly, and Crete, archeologists have found golden Greek and Roman tablets instructing the dead: "Don't drink the water!" "Head for the fixed stars—don't stop at any of the moving planets!" "If anyone tries to send you back to earth, boldly claim your birthright: you are an immortal soul, a fallen divinity, returning to your native land in heaven." Plato tells us to turn from the shadow-world toward the contemplation of what is the true, the good,

and the beautiful. In this sense, philosophy itself is nothing less than the quest for heaven.

Without heaven, is earth bearable? Is it unreasonable to hope for another world where “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well?” Not unreasonable, but a heaven up above is probably irrelevant to most people today. I believe we are more interested in getting rid of the barrier between us and some idyllic place in the sky.

I believe that any improvement of the human condition depends on reconciling the two realms, opening up the channels of communication between heaven and earth. How can we do that?

I offer three contemporary tales that give us hints. #1

I woke up last week at 5:25 in the a.m. on the edge of panic. What was it? I am not by nature a worrier. We had just been to a friend’s 95th birthday and given a ride to another friend who is barely able to walk, our car full of collapsible wheelchair. Was that why I felt this unusual and sudden loneliness in the universe? Considering what it would be like to live alone with my dog or having to move from my house? A sort of hell it is, the kind of blackness that comes upon us sometimes in the dark of the night.

Then, as I sat later on our deck in the mid-morning sun, finishing a book, a large, colorful butterfly landed under my chin, clutching the

front of my shirt in its tiny feet. It just stayed there, antennae pulsing. Like a visitation, making me think of the theory that butterflies are heavenly messengers from a world beyond. Maybe from my dear parents. Life come down. A few minutes later, my husband brought me a bunch of the most beautiful wildflowers he picked by the side of the road, pale lavender petals with a tiny red and yellow star right at the base of its stamen. Flowers we had never seen before.

I had to pay attention. Was this a message? Flowers and butterflies, frequent in heavenly visions. Visiting me in a dark place?

As my second example, I offer a luminous parable from under the sea. A parable for the reconciliation of the two realms, of heaven and earth, is the story of the gray whales in Baja. What scientists and boat people are learning about whales is forcing us to reconsider what once seemed to be a distinct boundary between our world and theirs. Whales have become the pursuers of humans, sometimes bringing their babies up for humans to see. “They’ll come right up to boats, let people touch their faces, give them massages, rub their mouths and tongues.” Whales have awed us forever; in early cosmologies they loomed as large as the cosmos itself, as hugely fearsome and immeasurable as any god. The very earth was said to be borne upon the back of a whale. What we have in these mammals are highly sophisticated minds in very unique bodies, living in such a different environment: whales now approaching us with some frequency, engaging in a form of communication with humans, both through eye contact (that BIG eye) and tactile interaction and perhaps acoustically.

We're coming to realize there has long been a kind of parallel "us" roaming the ocean's depths. If there is such communication between us, what parallel heavens, with their own structures and communications, can also reveal themselves?

My final example of heaven in our day comes from Sara Miles and her book *Take This Bread* which many of you are reading in preparation for her visit to St. Matthew's.

Here is what she writes about the food pantry she started at her Episcopal church:

here at the pantry I was finding a message from God. It said the hunger that had drawn us here was so that we could see what the kingdom of heaven looked like.

Some Christians thought the kingdom was about an afterlife, but I believed it was this world . . . The kingdom was the same old earth, populated by the same clueless humans, transformed wherever you could glimpse God shining through it.

The pantry looked like the kingdom to me precisely because we were all thrown in together—a makeshift community so much bigger and more contradictory than any of us would have chosen. And we found the kind of abundance described in parables: food for five thousand, money multiplying like manna; oil pouring out profligately and the lamps burning wildly all night long, blazing through the darkness of our lives.

Traditional services for Sara often seem lifeless. Where she finds life is in her hunger for the bread and the outstretched hand that offers it to her. About that, she writes:

. . .everyone was standing in a circle around the Table, singing the Eucharistic music . . .There was a smell of incense and wet cardboard and slightly rotten bell peppers; and fifty voices, out of tune, filled the rotunda . . .to see Donald break the English muffin. I understood why Christians imagined the kingdom of heaven as a feast: a banquet where nobody was excluded, where the weakest and most broken, the worst sinners and outcasts, were honored guests who welcomed one another in peace and shared their food.

Where is it that you feel life? Where is it that you see the *need* for life in the world? What, for you, is humdrum, repetitious, pointless, lifeless? Feeding the poor may not be the answer for you as it is for Sara Miles. But something just as gritty may be.

Our archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has said:

It's the really hungry who can smell fresh bread a mile away. For those who know their need, God is immediate—not an idea, not a theory, but life, food, air for the stifled spirit and for the body..

God gives each of us food from the life of God to do our share of creating the kingdom here. Life-giving happens in the transmission

between heaven and earth: In the wild and mysterious, strangely welcoming connections we feel between known and unknown, creature and creature, creature and Creator, between two realms.

And we know our need. It is for food, for that bread from heaven.

God's bread gives life to the world. God is immediate, not an idea, not a theory, but, in the intermingling of heaven and earth, God is life, food and air. We who are hungry, rejoice.

.The kingdom was the same old earth, populated by the same clueless humans, transformed wherever you could glimpse God shining through it.

Jesus talks about God in this gospel and the exchange between the two realms of heaven and earth in which you and I can find life.

, it is my Father who gives you real bread from heaven. I mean this: God's bread comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

And Jesus says to us who are hungry for life, breathless for the spirit and stewards of our real bodies:

"Don't work for food that goes to waste, but for food that lasts—food for real life—which the son of Adam will give you . . ."

"I swear to God, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven to eat; rather, it is my Father who gives you real bread from heaven. I mean this: God's bread comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Heaven is a timeless realm but it has multiple histories, from B. C. times all the way up to our Hymn #8:

In the Vision of Adamnan, the seventh century scholar-abbot of Iona points to the bible verse in which Paul is caught up in Heaven where he heard the ineffable words of the angels and the speech of them that dwell in heaven. There is lots of white linen, and marvelous music and fragrance. Adamnan calls heaven

A kingdom without pride or vanity, or falsehood, or outrage, or deceit, or pretence, or blushing, or shame, or reproach, or insult, or envy, or arrogance, or pestilence, or disease, or poverty, or nakedness, or death, or extinction, or hail, or snow, or wind, or rain, or din, or thunder, or darkness, or cold—a noble, admirable, ethereal realm, endowed with the wisdom, and radiance, and fragrance of a plenteous land, wherein is the enjoyment of every excellence. (217)

causing . . .the same malaise that William James found in the quasi-utopian educational community by Chautauqua Lake: a life without crime, drunkenness, or discord; a life “so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man.” A middle class heaven, James discovered, is no heaven at all. (316)

“Let this broken bread and shared wine be a foretaste of your kingdom,” we sang, “and bring us finally to your heavenly Table, where no one is left behind, and we will join with saints and angels at the feast you have prepared from the beginning.”

Plato and his followers tell us that our highest calling—our only chance at real happiness—is to turn from the shadow-world toward the eternal contemplation of what is the true, the good, and the beautiful. In this sense, philosophy itself. . .is nothing less than the quest for heaven.

It is the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

These troubles and distresses that you go through in these Waters are no sign that God has forsaken you, but are sent to try you, whether you will call to mind that which heretofore you have received of God’s goodness, and live upon God in your distresses. (30)

Some descriptions can even seem rather boring. William James said that a middle class heaven is not heaven at all.

To plant an abundant crop, heal a serious illness, found a successful endeavor, or build a lasting edifice, one must secure heaven's favor. We neglect heaven at our peril.

~~, more interested in including all of us in heaven rather than undergoing the fearful stages of judgment~~

I once read that Emile Zola was startled from his bed like a projectile, launched from sleep into mortal terror.

A female humpback in 2005 was entangled in a web of crab trap lines. After the hour it took for divers to cut her free, she swam around them in what looked like joyous circles, then visited each one of them, nudging them gently, as if in thanks.

Heaven for Sara Miles is not about angels or good behavior or piety; it is about real hunger, real food, and real bodies.

In all cultures where shamanism has flourished, on the other hand, heaven is very near to earth, and the folklore and fairy tale images abound: To reach heaven, one need only climb the tree, scale the ladder, cross the perilous bridge, ascend the mount, or ford the river that separates the twin worlds.

**It is not unreasonable to hunger for life, the life Jesus talks of that comes down from heaven
we want to know if little children, encouraged to draw their pictures of heaven, are, in fact, more in touch with heaven than we.**

becomes less important as a place: its

Traditional church for many people is boring. There is no life in it.