

This is the climactic passage of the book of Revelation which speaks of what we might call “the greater Christmas” –the final coming together of earth and heaven. The New Jerusalem descends. God takes up residence among us. All is renewed. This vision is set against the backdrop of the destruction of the old world order. In a surprisingly contemporary tone, the merchants of the earth watch as the great Babylon, consumer of the world’s goods, goes up in flames. As stated in Revelation 18:17, “*In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!*”

But as chapter 19 makes clear, this wealth was built on violence. When the whole structure comes tumbling down, and death and Hades are themselves thrown into the lake of fire, the earth greens in preparation for the restoration of heaven and earth. For now, that means there is a sharp divide between those who belong to Babylon—the current world order—and those who long for the coming of this “greater Christmas.” Would any of us be wondering this morning which side of that divide we are on?

William Barclay reflects on his earlier and later life in the book, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1st Paperback Edition, June 1, 1977). When he was younger he was very fit. He writes, “For the next fifty years I did not know what illness was. I played all games and played them hard—football, cricket, golf, tennis, running—and I played them well enough to share the sports’ championship of the school. So long as it was possible I kept playing games...But the day came when I had to stop. First, a bout of pneumonia and then a spell of acute bronchitis put an end to all that.

John [the author of] Revelation looked on heaven as a place where there will be no *sea*. I have come to look on heaven as a place where there will be no more *stairs*” (p. 20). I’m beginning to relate to Professor Barclay’s view!

How do you picture heaven? In John’s Revelation, “*He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new!*” (v. 5). The shocking news of this passage is that heaven and earth will pass away and a New Jerusalem will come down from heaven and “*God himself will be with them, and be their God*” (v. 3). Theologians like NT Wright have proposed that heaven is actually akin to God’s control room, and that we will spend our post-resurrection eternity here on earth, or at least on the *new earth*. Which is certainly something to think about. According to Wright, “... heaven is the control room for earth. Heaven is the CEO’s office from which earth is run—or it’s supposed to be, which is why we’re told to pray for that to become a reality” (<http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/on-earth-as-in-heaven/>).

There is a young woman who graduated from Blackhawk High School and Duquesne University who Jayne keeps in touch with. On the 8th anniversary of her son Will’s death, at age 6, his mom, Jennifer, wrote: God gifted me this morning with a dream so vivid I could feel Will’s hand in mine. Will was in a hospital bed and I asked him if he wanted to get rid of his bed and he said yes. I carried him on my hip and we left the room with the bed, traveled through a field on a path that led us to an outdoor church service. Everyone was praising God. A woman came up to me and told me that we had been in her heart for so long and she gave me one of those hugs that makes everything feel better.

Will and I continued down the road and it started to rain. I put him on my back so that we could share an umbrella and then the sky cleared to a perfect blue. Will ran ahead of me and I remember feeling so happy that he was so full of life. Then I woke up.

Today marks 8 years since Will ran ahead of us to a perfect blue sky. That morning when he took his last breath I imagined that he was finally free of a body that would not respond like a once rough and tumble boy needed. He was finally free of his battle with cancer and finally able to run and smile and be the boy that we knew prior to the poison that inhabited his body. The boy everyone knew and loved so well.

This day is a day that I dread, a day that I cherish, a day that I am reminded that amidst the horrible reality we were all living for 6 months prior to his passing, we were surrounded by angels. Our family, friends, nurses, doctors, coworkers, neighbors, everyone, cared for our family in a way that makes us strangely grateful for the experience. [Rest in Peace little buddy and thank you to those that continue to smile at the memory of Will.]

Jennifer's dream about her son Will reminds me of how John the Apostle was given a *vision* while in exile on the island of Patmos. That *vision* is now the book of Revelation that we are reading this morning. A visitor from heaven revealed to John the secrets of the unseen world and the future through vivid symbols.

In the Nineteenth Century, when today's closing hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," was written, the study of physics was an assortment of different fields that had little, if anything, in common with each other. But all that changed in 1919, when German mathematician Theodor Kaluza wrote a letter to Albert Einstein that would change physics forever. Kaluza had been playing around with a physics equation and incorporated an extra dimension into his calculations. And in doing so, he unwittingly managed to unite the previously unrelated theories of gravity and light. The 'Holy Grail' of physics, of course, is to unify and explain all physical phenomena in one single theory. Physicists haven't quite got there yet, but Kaluza's work showed that bringing theoretical higher dimensions we cannot directly see or experience into consideration can have some surprising implications.

I'm not going to suggest the obvious and say higher dimensions that have been proposed in theory can explain heaven or any other spiritual place. But I will say that if science can propose the existence of higher dimensions that we cannot directly perceive, it would not be unreasonable for science to accept the possibility of there being a spiritual realm that is distinct from our physical world.

Throughout the Bible there are many distinctions between the spiritual realm and our physical world, or in other words, between heaven and earth. The first verse in the Bible, which introduces the creation story in Genesis, starts with the words: "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.*" And today's reading from the second to last chapter of Revelation, the final book in the Bible, tells us: "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*"

Revelation is arguably the most puzzling book in the Bible, so it's probably not really surprising that unsound doctrines surrounding some of its fantastic content has sometimes led to really bad theology. But I digress. It's relatively sedate seven letters to seven churches in Asia deal with local issues of the day, but soon after that Revelation contains a hallucinatory nightmare peppered with images of multi-headed creatures, locusts with tails like scorpions, dragons, and various personifications of evil. Finally, after much toil and tribulation, the Apocalypse concludes with the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth.

About a century ago, Theodor Kaluza's bold calculations awakened science to the possibility of other dimensions. It took the birth of Jesus Christ to bring heaven to earth. Heaven and earth met when God came in human form. Humankind was estranged from God, but we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life, including death. Jesus triumphed over death and sin with his resurrection, and we can be confident that we can share in his risen life.

We're all familiar with the prayer Jesus taught us. We have said it today in this very service, but I would like to remind us of these lines, as they are written in the Gospel of Matthew. "*Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" We regularly pray for the coming of God's kingdom, so that God's will is fully done here on earth.

When we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit people in prison, we help to bring about the coming of God's kingdom. When we show compassion to the last, the lost, and the least, and we make an effort to deal with the suffering of children who live in poverty, we help bring about the coming of God's kingdom.

While history was changed forever by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago, when we consider the state of the world today, it is clear that God's involvement with the world is not yet over, nor should it be. And I believe it is our calling to work toward the coming of God's kingdom here on earth.

God is transforming the world, but he is doing so *through us* and we are privileged to play our part in the coming of God's kingdom.

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Revelation 21:3-4).

At Christmastime we celebrate and remember that heaven came to earth, and that heaven came to us. There is a greater Christmas that is yet to come.

John's vision describes when, at last, "heaven comes to stay." Glory to God! Amen.