

## “Paradise”

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UCC at The Villages, Oxford  
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*Thanksgiving Sunday/CoG*

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

And [the criminal crucified beside him] said,

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And he said to him,

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Luke 23:42-43

Let us pray... O God,

No matter what we go through in life,

may we recognize how you are present with us.

Especially in times of desolation and abandonment,

remind us that there is nothing that we face alone without you.

Amen

Paradise – what a beautiful word...

The first time I heard the word, “paradise”, was probably in connection with the TV series, “Adventures in Paradise” with Gardner McKay sailing islands of the South Pacific.

Our office manager, Penny Timson, selected the bulletin cover image with this picture of a tropical beach and a rainbow as an added feature symbolizing hope.

Essentially, it is an alternative reference to “Heaven” spoken by Jesus to comfort a dying man crucified next to him, amidst their mutual agony.

The word “Paradise” comes from a Latin word with an original meaning of “walled enclosure”.

There is a comparable Hebrew word פֶּרֶדֶס (pardes) meaning “garden” or “orchard” – and is found in the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Nehemiah, but not Genesis.

The Latin form is probably derived from the Greek word, “parádeisos (παράδεισος)”, which breaks down to “para”, meaning “along with”, and “deisos” which is a stretch for “theos”, still it suggests that it means, “with + god”.

So, to be in Paradise could mean to be in “the Garden with God”... back in ‘the Garden’... why not?

As we heard from Colossians 1:20, which says:

*And God was pleased for him to make peace by sacrificing his blood on the cross, so that all beings in heaven and on earth would be brought back to God.*

Willard, p.2

Traditionally, this has meant that Jesus paid the price for human salvation, dying for our sins to provide a moral exchange to justify God's mercy. Contemporary scholarship suggests that Christ died *because* of our sins, and that we should stop doing what is hurtful and false and live accordingly.

To do this, we must accept forgiveness – forgiving ourselves in the process, even as we have been forgiven, and to forgive others in turn.

In the process of allowing ourselves to be transformed in this way – to be more honestly who we are by forgiving ourselves and others, we help make room for the love of God to transform the world into a more hospitable place.

We are just asked to take up 'the cross' of our own responsibility to forgive and love in turn.

Then what?

That seems to be a long way from happening here on planet Earth. Taking up our 'cross' does not guarantee that the transformation of having God's 'Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven' will be anytime soon. Perhaps, it does mean we can achieve 'paradise' in the sense of 'paradeus' – being 'with God'.

We Christians are not spared from trouble in this life – no more than Jesus was spared as he died from a painful death at the hands of enemies.

So, in this life, the only thing we can really count on is the abiding presence of God through Christ despite the circumstances as we still strive to show forth the love of God – which can be its own reward...

This week, Gwen Ifill, a senior news anchor for Public TV's "Newshour", passed away from cancer – which was unexpected to the viewing audience. Gwen was the first African-American woman to host a national news program and was well-known in the TV journalism world for her commitment to 'getting it right' and making it fun for those around her. She died Monday and there have been tributes all week long on the news program she co-hosted with Judy Woodruff, as well as "Washington Week" – a roundtable discussion on Friday evenings.

The "Washington Week" tribute was especially moving with eight journalists who had been worked with her over the years – five women, three men, hosted by the only one of them who was a person of color; and they were all surrounded by enlarged photographs of Gwen Ifill. During their reminiscing, one of the journalists noted that it was difficult at first because of her grief, to see these pictures of her colleague, who was characteristically beaming confidence and joy.

Willard, p.3

But then she said she began to embrace these images,  
particularly because of Gwen's smile.

One of the men had also mentioned the way that she smiled  
was so engaging and quoted someone who had once said,  
"You could read a book by her smile."

A couple weeks ago on All Saints Sunday, we presented a powerpoint essay  
that was prepared by Jo Posillico and Penny Timson  
as a slide show of members of our congregation – family & friends,  
who passed on in the years since we became a church.

We only get glimpses from the Bible about the time to come,  
but a loved one's smile is a hopeful way to think about  
what Heaven should be about.

There is some assurance of this from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:12 which says:

*For now we see in a mirror dimly,  
but then face to face.  
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully,  
even as I have been fully understood.*

There is also the traditional benediction that comes from Numbers 6:24-26  
that we will meet God face to face – whose face will reflect our loved ones, too...  
Maybe "Paradise – being "with God" is not only  
like being in the company of the people we love,  
but also like just being in the company of loving people...

*The LORD bless you  
and keep you:  
The LORD make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you:  
The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

The second half of Psalm 22 is a description of the Heavenly assembly,  
or "Paradise" – of being "with God", in terms of a re-gathering of humankind.  
But first, Psalm 22 begins with the plight of someone caught up  
in the world's violence – events that could even be described as a crucifixion.  
The first verse is familiar to us as Jesus' cry from the cross...

Willard, p.4

Listen now to my paraphrase of Psalm 22:1-31...

MY GOD! MY GOD!  
FOR WHAT PURPOSE HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?  
FAR AWAY FROM HOPE IS MY CRY OF DISTRESS!

MY ALMIGHTY GOD, I CALLED OUT THROUGH THE DAY,  
BUT THERE WAS NO RESPONSE;  
AND THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT, BUT THERE WAS NO QUIET!  
EVEN THOU, THYSELF, ARE SO 'SACRED' AS TO BE 'SET APART' –  
AND CAPTIVE TO THE EXPECTATIONS OF ISRAEL –  
'THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WITH GOD'.  
ISOLATED IN A HIGH PLACE – THOU, THYSELF,  
ARE CUT OFF IN THAT HIGH PLACE  
AND SEVERED FROM HUMANITY...  
YET TO THEE, GOD, THE ANCESTORS CRIED OUT AND WERE RESCUED;  
THEY WERE DESOLATED, BUT THEY TRUSTED THEE,  
AND THEY WERE NOT DISAPPOINTED...

BUT I FEEL LIKE I AM VERMIN, NOT EVEN A PERSON;  
JUST A DISGRACE TO HUMANITY, DESPISED BY PEOPLE.  
ALL WHO LOOK UPON ME FOR THEIR SPECTACLE,  
MOCK ME WITH WIDE-MOUTHED INSULTS  
AND THEY NOD TO THEMSELVES.  
SCORNFULLY, THEY TALK TO ONE ANOTHER ABOUT ME, SAYING,  
'THE LORD GOD IS HIS HELPER.  
CERTAINLY GOD WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO HELP HIM NOW!'

IN TRUTH, THOU DREW ME FORTH FROM THE WOMB  
TO THE NUTURING BREASTS OF MY MOTHER.  
EVER SINCE I HAD BEEN BROUGHT FORTH TO HER  
BY THY LOVING-KINDNESS, THOU HAVE BEEN MY GOD.  
DO NOT BE FAR AWAY FROM ME NOW,  
SO THAT IN THE MIDST OF MY DISTRESS, NOTHING CAN HELP!  
THEY ARE SURROUNDING ME  
LIKE A PACK OF RAPACIOUS PREDATORS CLOSING IN!  
THEIR JAWS GAPE WIDE LIKE A LION'S TO TEAR AND TAUNT...

I AM LIKE WATER THAT HAS BEEN Poured OUT;  
IT IS AS IF ALL MY BONES ARE DISCONNECTED.  
MY HEART HAS BECOME LIKE CANDLE-WAX AND IT HAS MELTED AWAY.  
LIKE BROKEN POTTERY, MY POWER HAS DRIED UP FROM ME.  
AND MY TONGUE STICKS TO THE ROOF OF MY MOUTH.  
AND I FEEL STREWN ABOUT LIKE GRAVEDIRT...

Willard, p.5

LIKE WILD DOGS, THEY HEM ME IN...

A GANG OF THEM CIRCLES AROUND ME...

THEY PINION MY HANDS AND MY FEET!

I CAN SEE MY WHOLE BODY; THEY STARE AT MY SITUATION.

CONTENDING GREEDILY, THEY GAMBLE WITH EACH OTHER  
FOR MY THINGS.

O THOU ART THE ONE WHO IS GOD! DO NOT BE FAR AWAY!

MY ALMIGHTY GOD! HELP ME! HURRY!

SAVE MY SOUL FROM DESOLATION!

SAVE MY POOR LIFE FROM THE POWER OF THE DOG!

SPARE ME FROM THE RAVENOUS BEAST AND THE CRUEL MONSTER...

*I WILL TELL THE STORY OF THY NAME TO MY BROTHERS & SISTERS.*

*IN THE MIDST OF THE FAMILY GATHERING, I WILL EXALT THEE!*

THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE REVERENCE FOR THE ONE WHO IS GOD,  
SING ALSO YOUR OWN LOVESONG TO GOD.

LET ALL YOU OFFSPRING OF JACOB, 'THE PRODIGAL', CELEBRATE!

AND STAND IN AWE OF GOD, ALL YOU OFFSPRING OF ISRAEL –  
'THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WITH GOD'!

FOR VICTIMS IN THEIR SUFFERING ARE NOT TO BE  
HATED AND PUNISHED.

AND GOD'S FACE WILL NOT BE HIDDEN FROM YOU,  
FOR YOUR CRIES TO GOD HAVE BEEN HEARD.

*BEFORE THEE, MY LOVESONG OF BELOVED COMMUNITY SHALL RISE UP.*

*MY PROMISES WILL BE FULFILLED*

*IN THE PRESENCE OF THOSE WHO RESPECT THEE:*

THERE WILL BE ENOUGH FOOD FOR POOR PEOPLE;

THOSE WHO HAVE NEED FOR THE ONE WHO IS GOD

WILL HAVE REASON TO GIVE THANKS.

YOUR HEARTS WILL LIVE FOREVER!

YOU WILL REMEMBER AND ABIDE WITH THE ONE WHO IS GOD

THROUGHOUT ALL THE CORNERS OF THE EARTH.

AND ALL AFFILIATIONS WILL DROP AWAY

BEFORE THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

FOR WHEN THE ONE WHO IS GOD IS IN CONTROL,

PATRIOTIC LOYALTIES ARE CONTROLLED.

Willard, p.6

AND ALL THE ARROGANT OF THE EARTH  
WILL COME TO AN END AND FALL DOWN.  
BEFORE THE FACE OF GOD, ALL WHO ARE ADDICTED  
AND THOSE WHO SIMPLY CANNOT HELP THEMSELVES WILL  
FINALLY HIT BOTTOM...

*CHILDREN TO COME WILL SERVE GOD;  
THEY WILL TELL THE STORY OF 'THE LORD'  
TO THEIR LOVED ONES.  
THEY WILL TELL OF THE GREAT JUSTICE OF GOD  
TO PEOPLE YET TO COME – THAT GOD HAS HELPED US!*

We have a God who walked among us, who touched others with healing,  
who spoke words of truth, and who could even reflect our humanity  
with a smile...

Amen

May the One who is God bless you  
and keep you ;  
May the face of the One who is God be made to shine upon you  
and be gracious to you;  
May the countenance of the One who is God be lifted up upon you,  
and give you peace.

*Our lesson today from Colossians 1:11-20 celebrates the power of God  
over 'the powers that be' in this world and  
that Christ is the visible expression of that power  
through the church...*

- <sup>11</sup> [God's] glorious power will make you patient  
and strong enough to endure anything, and you will be truly happy.
- <sup>12</sup> I pray that you will be grateful to God for letting you have part in  
what he has promised his people in the kingdom of light.
- <sup>13</sup> God rescued us from the dark power of Satan and  
brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son,  
<sup>14</sup> who forgives our sins and sets us free.
- <sup>15</sup> Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen.  
He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation.
- <sup>16</sup> Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth,  
everything seen and unseen, including all forces  
and powers, and all rulers and authorities.  
All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him.
- <sup>17</sup> God's Son was before all else,  
and by him everything is held together.
- <sup>18</sup> [Christ] is the head of his body, which is the church.  
He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death,  
so that he would be above all others.
- <sup>19</sup> God himself was pleased to live fully in his Son.
- <sup>20</sup> And God was pleased for him to make peace by sacrificing his blood on the cross,  
so that all beings in heaven and on earth would be brought back to God.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Luke 23:33-43

33 And when they came to the place which is called The Skull,  
there they crucified him, and the criminals,  
one on the right and one on the left.

34 And Jesus said,

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”  
And they cast lots to divide his garments.

35 And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying,

“He saved others; let him save himself,  
if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”

36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, 37 and saying,

“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

38 There was also an inscription over him,

“This is the King of the Jews.”

39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying,

“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

40 But the other rebuked him, saying,

“Do you not fear God,  
since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

41 And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds;  
but this man has done nothing wrong.”

42 And he said,

“Jesus, remember me when you come into <sup>[c]</sup> your kingdom.”

43 And he said to him,

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”