

Heaven

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on the sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; **Revelation 21:10; 21:22-22:5**; John 14:23-29.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Listen to a story. It's a true story but the names and places have been changed to protect the guilty. I remembered the story while thinking about the vision about the New Jerusalem which many Christians understand to refer symbolically to heaven. In John's vision, heaven is a city. Heaven is a community of nations with God Almighty and Jesus Christ at the center of their lives. Heaven is a city where everybody will drink from the water of life. And the leaves from the tree of life will heal warring nations. Heaven is a place where sin and evil will have no place. Heaven's gates will always be opened throughout eternity. I believe in heaven. I want to go heaven when I die. But more than that, I look for the day heaven, the holy city Jerusalem, will come down to earth. Now, a lot of people in America, especially well educated people, don't believe in heaven any more. And that's what the story I'm going to tell you is about. I want you think about what it has to with heaven and what you believe about heaven.

Jimmy Smith grew up in Mississippi. None of his family had ever gone to college. In fact, his father and mother never got beyond fifth and sixth grade. Jimmy's older brothers and sisters graduated from high school, but Jimmy was the first to go to college. He went to a small Christian college where he had to take some courses in the Bible. He loved what he was leaning and believed that God was calling him to the ministry. After college he went to seminary. After seminary he

went on to graduate school where he earned a Ph.D. in religious studies. His family was quite proud of him although they weren't too sure about some of his thinking. *After graduate school Jimmy got a* ~~Jimmy never was called to a church.~~ *religion* Instead, he got a job teaching in a small college up North.

One day Jimmy got a phone call from his mother in Mississippi. "Jimmy, you know your Uncle Buford has cancer. Well, it's got real bad. They say he ain't got but about six weeks to live. He don't have a preacher, Jimmy. He's scared. Come down here and talk to him! Tell him about heaven! Jimmy's family believed he was something of an expert on heaven. After all, he went to school for years and studied the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. He certainly knows all about heaven. That's what his family thought,

Jimmy remembered that, long before the phone call from his mother, he was talking with his father and his dad asked him, "Jimmy, tell me, what's it like in heaven. I mean, are there really streets of gold up there?"

Jimmy answered somewhat cavalierly, "Well, Daddy, I don't have the foggiest idea."

His dad was dumbfounded. "What in the world you been doing up there in that fancy seminary of yours?"

Jimmy didn't answer. He just kept quiet. Nevertheless, his family still believed that he knew all kinds of things about heaven that his uncle Buford needed to hear. So, in response to his mom's urgent request, he drove six hundred miles to Mississippi to talk to his dying uncle.

His Aunt Viola met him at the door. She and Buford had one of the finest marriages Jimmy had ever known. She invited him in, hugged him, and pointed to a lounge chair in front of a TV with its back to the door. Jimmy went around the chair and over to Buford. He wasn't prepared for what he found. His uncle now weighed only ninety-five pounds. When Jimmy sat down, he tried to hide his discomfort by making himself look right at Buford.

Jimmy had always liked his Uncle Buford. He was always fun loving. In his younger years he'd been tall and handsome with a mane of shiny black hair that he parted down the middle and slicked back with Vaseline hair oil. Buford was a proud man. He always walked tall despite the poverty in which he and his family had lived most of their lives. He had two great loves in his life. His greatest love was Viola, his wife of 40 years. His second great love in life was Budweiser which contributed heavily to his poverty. He used to brag that he helped build Busch Gardens.

But now Uncle Buford was weak and unable to speak above a whisper. Jimmy stood there before his uncle trembling. "Tell him about heaven," his mom whispered. But that was a problem for Jimmy. It seems like the more Jimmy learned the less he knew about heaven. What should he tell his uncle? He thought about telling his uncle about the historical development of the idea of heaven in the early church and middle ages. He thought about telling his uncle about the Marxist critique of the idea of heaven as *pie in the sky by and by*. He thought about telling his uncle how 19th century theologians secularized the idea of heaven

talked about inevitable historical progress. He even thought about telling his uncle that many modern, well educated people don't even believe in heaven anymore. But he couldn't say *any* of this so he just sat there feeling uncomfortable. He felt so inadequate. He even felt a little anger towards some of his professors who spoke of heaven as an abstract idea rather than a reality.

Then somebody burst through the door without knocking. It was his mother's sister, Aunt Nellie. She came in smoking a cigarette and carrying a coffee cup. Although it was late in the afternoon, she still had curlers in her hair and was wearing her pink bathrobe. The thick make up she'd put on three days ago was still plainly visible. Jimmy admired his Aunt Nellie because she had overcome a twenty-five year bout with alcoholism but the years of abuse had taken their affect. She ~~looked much older than her 40 years.~~

She walked over to her brother, Buford, and gave him a big juicy kiss and a hug. She told a couple of terribly inappropriate off-color jokes. After each joke Nellie broke into a laugh. Then she'd cough her head off and laugh some more. Buford chuckled quietly after each story.

Then Nellie changed her tone. She looked right at her brother and spoke to him. "I gotta say something to you, Buford, and you're not going to like it. A lot of folks are telling you that you're sick but that you're gonna get better. I came to tell you that they're lyin' to you. You're gonna die. Now we're all gonna die, but you're probably gonna die in the next month or so. The doctors say three to six weeks. But I gotta tell you, just trust in Jesus. Listen to him. I know what I'm

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talking about. Jesus told me to quit drinking whiskey and I done it with his help. Buford, just trust in Jesus. He'll take care of you. And if you live, that's good. And if you die it's gonna be all right because you're gonna see God. He's got a mansion for you in a beautiful city. You'll get to drink at the river of the water of life. You'll get to eat from the tree of life. There's going to be all kinds of people living there, Red and Yellow, Black and White and you're going to have to get used to living with them. There not going to be anymore long dark nights for you. You'll get to meet God face to face. Just trust in Jesus, Buford.

Jimmy says this happened about 25 years ago. Buford died three weeks later and went to heaven. Aunt Nellie is still sober and goes three times a week to the little Pentecostal Holiness Church that meets on main street in the abandoned movie theater. And Jimmy - he's a Presbyterian minister and, and despite all his learning, he really believes in heaven - just like the Bible says.

Let us pray:

[The story is adapted from Tex Sample, Ministry in an Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, & Minnie Pearl.