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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/5/2014, Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21
Heaven

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁹Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;
²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures *in heaven*, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19-20, NRSV)

My sermon this Ash Wednesday is one of the simplest sermons ever: I want us to remember heaven. Jesus does too: he wants us to remember heaven and the divine dimension of things. In today's Gospel text, he warns us against being imprudent. He warns us against the odd calculus by which we judge the sins of earth to be more fun than the joys of heaven. How so? By asking us to remember heaven. "Store up for yourselves treasures *in heaven*." There, they will be safe. No thieves, nor moth, nor rust, will hurt the treasures we lay up in heaven. So, lay them up there! Be busy as a bee making sweet things to be stored in heaven. Keep your eye on the ball! Do not be so preoccupied with the things of earth that you forget the things of heaven.

There is no thinking of Jesus without thinking of heaven. Jesus came from heaven and he returned there — he "ascended into heaven," as the Creed says. Jesus came from heaven, returned to heaven, was mindful of heaven *all the time*, and wants us to be so mindful too.

This coming Sunday, we will hear the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Do you think the devil could come upon Jesus in some off moment — an off moment when Jesus was no longer mindful of the divine dimension? No way! The devil is over-matched in trying to tempt Jesus, because Jesus never takes his eye off the ball.

Jesus had the holy habit of evaluating things from the point of view of eternity. Compared to eternity, what is the praise of people worth? That's why it makes no sense to Jesus that we should practice our piety "to be seen of men." Practice piety, yes! But not for the sake of this world's applause. Much more important is the applause of heaven. Let the angels above, and the wise Communion of Saints above, and Jesus himself who dwells in heaven applaud our deeds. That is worth something!

SOMETIMES IT IS EASY

Sometimes it is easy to think of heaven. I am a pastor who believes in heaven. And this means that when I visit someone who is dying, I can bring more than the treasures of this earth. It is good to bring the treasures of this earth — things like flowers and chocolates and best of all, words of love and appreciation for what the dying person has meant to us. But a Christian can bring even more than these good things: we can also bring the hope of heaven. We can bring the hope of seeing again our loved ones who have sailed on before us to that distant and better shore. We can bring the hope of eternal life — not life for ninety-six years or ten thousand years, but of everlasting life, through endless ages. And best of all, we can bring the hope of seeing Jesus with our own eyes, and having our holy God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — set us straight and heal us and make us better people than we have ever been so far.

Likewise, when the person has died, I am glad that I believe in heaven, so that I can say to the grieving that the story is not yet done. Eternity still surrounds us — both for our comfort and for our strengthening in this present life. I am glad that I can say that this dear one who has died is in the hands of Jesus, and we can well afford to entrust that one to heaven.

So, sometimes it is easy to think of heaven. When the Lord is laying a loved one to rest or when we sorrow at the death of a loved one, it is good that there is still heaven above. It changes everything!

SLIPPING AWAY

But often we do not think of heaven. We let the divine dimension slip away from our consciousness. Indeed, some theologians and proud preachers make it a virtue to forget about heaven. One of the most miserable phrases I have ever heard in my life I heard from someone who fancied himself an enlightened Christian. He dismissed heaven and showed contempt for heaven with the awful words “it is but pie in the sky by and by.” Never flinch before such words! Never let someone deprive you of heaven. For if someone steals heaven away from you, everything else is then up for sale.

It is not enough, my brothers and sisters, to *like* Jesus if we consider him to be dead as a doornail. I bet there are lots of people in this world who like Jesus — even atheists and believers in other religions. If you like Jesus, that is good, very good, but also it is a time for some soul-searching: Do you believe he lives? Do you believe that you are in his hands? Do you believe that you must account for your life to him? Do you believe that you must reckon with heaven? Do you believe that it is not good enough to lay up treasures on earth, “where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal,” if we are not above all trying to lay up treasures in heaven?

LENT

It is Ash Wednesday. Liturgical scholars call it the most solemn liturgy of the church year. It is the start of Lent—a time when I am trying to call us toward nobility of soul. It is time for us to renew the battle against the devil and for our own humanity. Let us join Jesus and all the saints of old in trying to flourish, in trying to be true and whole men and women, boys and girls.

In Chrysostom's homily on our passage, he compares greedy folks to dogs chained to a tomb:

...bound like a dog to a tomb, by the tyranny of riches, more grievously than by any chain, barking at all that come near thee, thou hast this one employment continually, to keep [thy money]. Than this what can be more wretched? (Chrysostom on Matthew 6:1-23)

He is on to something. Being riveted down to money and to vainglory, so that we can hardly even bring ourselves to pray unless we spy someone near who can see our prayer and give us credit for it, why that is beneath us! Our Maker did not create us for such slavery. He wants us to be free men and women, boys and girls. He wants the thought of God to free us to be true humans on earth. He wants the thought of the things of heaven to brace us for goodness in this world below. And he wants us, as it were, to take our place at the side of the apostles, saints, martyrs, and Jesus himself and to do as we pray so often and so well for the world: "Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in *heaven*."

So, Lent is here. Let us be busy as bees. Let us strive to lay up some treasure in heaven, being good citizens of heaven, true children of the heavenly Father, and faithful brothers to our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.