

**Christus Victor, Part 1: Eden Revisited**  
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Countryside Community Church (UCC)  
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**I. Reclaiming Jesus**

**Scripture:** Genesis 3:21-24 Matthew 4:12-17; Mark 1:14-15

This morning marks the beginning of the second of three 7-part series exploring the foundations of Christian faith. We are taking a closer look at these foundations, partly because of our partnership in Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative, which means that we are more apt to be asked probing questions about our faith, not only by Jews and Muslims, but by fellow Christians, many of whom presume that God has created only one path to heaven, which is through Christian faith. For the rest, these Christians maintain, the stain of Original Sin, originally incurred by Adam and Eve in the Garden, remains upon them which means they will be punished in hell for eternity.

In our last series, we saw how fundamentally flawed this assumption about Original Sin and its consequences is. If you missed it, the sermons are available in the Foyer, posted on our website, and on YouTube.

The central thesis of our present series is that salvation does not mean being saved from eternal punishment in hell, but *discovering that you, and all people, are loved beyond your wildest imagination and determining to orient your life around this discovery*. The real question to life, then, is not "Are you saved?" but "Are you used?" That is, have you accepted and trusted God's deep love for you enough that God can work through you to achieve God's purpose for your life – and the world to which you are connected?

Contrary to what some people assume, God never needed Jesus in order to love us. God loves Jews and Muslims and those of other faiths just as much as God loves Christians. So what good is Jesus, if God doesn't need Jesus to love us? Well, a great many of us never come to trust God's love for us – or God's love for others – without Jesus's help. Thus, for a Christian, Jesus is quite literally our Savior. He saves us by showing us that God's love and grace, which we inherently distrust as unreal or wishful thinking, is very real, and ever-present.

For some of us, all it took were Jesus's life and teachings to convince us of the reality of God's love enough to live in God's light. For others of us, he went all the way to the Cross and beyond before we let our guard down and gave God our hearts. But whenever it was that we turned our lives over to God, loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength in response to God's seemingly impossible

love for us, that's when we gained eyes to see something new, that was completely invisible before we experienced God's love.

We see that heaven is all around us; that this world is infused with God's love and shot through with God's grace. This doesn't mean that we become oblivious to the pain and suffering of the world. In fact, we become more cognizant than ever when we begin to trust God's love for us and others. But the pain and sorrow we experience over the world's brokenness is no longer capable of blocking our view of the glory and majesty to be found in the world God has created.

This is why in the gospels, when Jesus announces his message to the world, he proclaims, "Heaven is already here! Change your whole way of thinking and believe the God news."

As a reminder for you language nerds, this is the most accurate translation of Jesus's first words of public teaching in the gospels of Matthew (4:7) and Mark (1:15). What you normally read is "The Kingdom of Heaven (or "of God," depending on which gospel you read) has drawn near. Repent and believe the good news." But the verb translated "drawn near" in Greek is a "Perfect Indicative Active" meaning it has to do with an action that has taken place in the PAST and has ONGOING significance. Thus, the verb is more accurately translated as "already here" – as in, "Heaven is **READY HERE!**"

Some of you know this already, of course. You also know that the word that is commonly translated as "repent," from the verb *metanoia*, literally means "change your whole way of thinking".

But we are so accustomed to the traditional translation that the more literal translation must be heard many times before it finally sinks in. Jesus isn't warning us to repent of our sins before it's too late and God sends the faithful to heaven and the unfaithful to hell. Jesus is inviting us all to finally trust the still, small voice that calls to all of us in our heart of hearts – the voice that assures us that we are loved beyond our wildest imagination and invites us to orient our lives and our loves, our hopes and our dreams, around *this* voice and no other. "Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news!" Jesus tells us. "Heaven is already here." Because God is already here.

Of course, heaven isn't here in its fullness. In Jesus's day, the rabbi's sometimes spoke of seven levels of heaven. The apostle Paul also spoke of being uplifted in a vision to "the third heaven." (2 Corinthians 12:2) So affirming that heaven is here, now, does not deny the fact that it will be greater, later.

## **II. #Blessed**

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:1-17

When Jesus proclaimed that heaven, on whatever level, is here already, he surely received pushback from many. Frankly, it's probably why enough people took offense at him to crucify him eventually. They objected that heaven could not be here in our midst if there is still poverty, or poverty of spirit, or death, or injustice, or warfare, or persecution. So if heaven were real, it must come later, and surely only for the righteous.

Yet you may recall that the very next words of public teaching from Jesus after he announces that heaven is already here is his famous Beatitudes in which he systematically goes down the list of objections. Says Jesus: If you are poor in spirit (or just plain poor in Luke's gospel), you're *blessed*. If you are mourning, you're *blessed*. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you're *blessed*. If you are persecuted, you're *blessed*. If you are trying to wage peace in the middle of a war zone, you're blessed.

Frankly, these statements sound pretty naïve unless you take account of one thing: that our experience of heaven-in-the-now has little to do with external circumstances and everything to do with loving relationship. Look at it this way: Suppose you are the person who is poor, or poor in spirit; or you are the person who is mourning the loss of a loved one, or is persecuted. How would your outlook on life change if you have a soul mate – a Beloved, another man or woman in your life whom you count as your life partner – who is right there by your side through it all?

When we take marriage vows, do we not swear to remain by our Beloved's side "in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow as long as we both shall live"? What gives us the courage to make such vows is the quiet confidence down at the deepest wellsprings of our being that, as long as our Beloved is in our life, we can find heaven in whatever hell the world can throw at us.

This quiet confidence is exactly what Jesus is getting at when he proclaims that heaven is already here and that blessing can be found even in the midst of life's greatest struggles. Only, he's not promising the ongoing presence of a man or woman in our life. He's talking about another kind of soul mate: our Creator, whose love for us is so many times greater, more reliable, and ever-present and accessible than that of any other human being, that we truly don't come to know this world as "heaven" until we come to know this God.

### III. Reclaiming Eden

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush aflame with God  
But only one who sees takes off one's shoes.  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*  
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I have always loved this poem because it reminds me of one of the often forgotten implications of Jesus's observation that heaven is already here. Namely, that Jesus is, in effect, inviting us to remember that we are still in Eden.

"Eden?!" you say? "I thought we got kicked out of Eden long ago!"

No, we never got kicked out of Eden. The myth says that in the beginning God created Eden, and then God planted a Garden in Eden where God placed the original couple. Then, when things went south, God ushered the couple only out of Eden's *garden*, not Eden itself. The only difference the couple experienced in God's created order of things between living in the Garden of Eden, and living in Eden outside the Garden was that the land did not produce crops quite so abundantly, women experienced more pain in childbirth, and there was less of a bond of trust between animals and human beings.

In other words, according to the ancient biblical tradition, we continue to live in a world that is almost identical to the world God intended for us to inhabit before we left the Garden. The main difference is in us, not the rest of Creation, for we now have knowledge of Good and Evil. And while this dualistic approach to life created – and continues to create – a lot of mayhem in our world, I find it helpful to remember that God's Creation is pretty much as pristine, glorious, and sacred as God ever intended for it to be.

Thus, when I find myself becoming so overwhelmed by what we humans are doing to each other that I lose my grip on Jesus's assurance that "heaven is already here," I spend even more time out in untrammelled nature than I normally do. I find that deeper engagement with nature tends to lead me back to a place within myself where I can sense God's Presence once again and inwardly take off my shoes.

By the way, did you know that there are far more flies in the world than human beings? In fact, flies are so numerous that they not only outnumber us, but they outweigh us! Now, imagine that each fly was not a creation of God but the devil. (If you have ever spent time in Minnesota you might believe this to be true!) On this assumption, would you pronounce the world to be a horribly corrupt, irredeemable place that no godly person would want to inhabit? Or would you simply buy a fly swatter?

Now, imagine that each and every human being is purely evil. We're not, of course (in fact the scriptures say we are created in God's very image and likeness), but let's just pretend for a moment. If each of us were purely evil, yet even the world's flies outnumber and outweigh us, then in the grand scheme of things we take even less away from the goodness and majesty of God's Creation than evil flies would! In fact, we would have to admit that, as badly as we can

screw up God's plans for the world, we can be assured of one thing: we're not that powerful.

God's world does not revolve around us. It revolves around God. And, as Jesus shows us, when *we human beings* begin to revolve around God, too, we discover that "earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush aflame with God." Somehow this discovery, and our constant awareness that God burns with love for God's human creations as well, makes us far more capable of dealing with the world's flies than when the flies are all we see.