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Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our gospel reading for today contains that reading which is often used for funerals.

Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

Yes, today's gospel reading is a familiar funeral text.

And the text has been interpreted to mean that Jesus is speaking about his departure from earth, that he is speaking about his Ascension.

And that Jesus is saying that once back in heaven, he will be about preparing a place for all his people.

And that place being prepared in heaven is likened to an enormous mansion with many rooms.

And Jesus promises that he will come again and will take us to himself back into heaven.

And so, we can see why this gospel reading is often read at funerals, for it gives us a vision of what heaven looks like.

This text gives us a description of heaven, which is a big, BIG house, with many, many rooms, enough rooms for all those persons who will come to reside in heaven.

PAUSE

Now, sisters and brothers in Christ, there are other visions of heaven.

Indeed, when we think of heaven we often think of a place filled with clouds, and with angels playing harps, and with St. Peter there letting people in through the pearly gates.

I am not sure when and how that vision emerged exactly, but this is quite a familiar vision of heaven.

And, sometimes we speak of heaven as place where there is no more weeping, no more death, where there is no more suffering, no more poverty or want.

Sometimes we speak of heaven then as that place where there is only joy and gladness, where we can also enjoy the past times, be whatever those may be, those past times that we have come to know and love here on earth.

And there is also the vision of heaven as a new creation, such that the earth will be redeemed of sin, and the world as we know with get a complete makeover.

And the wolf will live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf, and the lion, and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

And they will not hurt or destroy.

Isaiah's picture here is one of a complete reversal of our fallen world, which of course is a world marked by prey and predator.

A world marked by carnivores, flesh eating animals, which violently kill in order to eat.

A world marked with harmful animals which do not get along with humans.

Isaiah's vision then is one of a new creation, where earth and its inhabitants go through a complete makeover.

And then there is the vision of heaven where heaven is understood as one eternal worship service.

And I always have to pause and think to myself that for many, describing heaven as one eternal worship service, is probably more like THE OTHER PLACE, where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

Yes, an eternal worship service would probably be for many who don't like going to church, who may find it boring and uninspiring...

Yes, for many who don't like going to church, an eternal worship service would no doubt seem like the opposite of heaven.

But, the Bible does describe heaven as a place where there is music and continual praise of the Lord.

Where there is feasting like communion but on a much grander scale.

In fact, we speak about communion in the liturgy as a foretaste of the feast to come.

PAUSE

So, yes, there are several visions of heaven out there.

And, truth be told, we as people like to speculate what heaven is like.

We like to speculate, we like to hypothesize, we like to imagine what heaven might be like.

PAUSE

Now, interestingly enough, Martin Luther had a humorous saying about speculation.

You see, Luther on one occasion was being harassed by a young philosopher who kept asking Luther over and over again the same question.

The young philosopher wanted to know where God was all the while before the world came into existence.

And having reached his breaking point, Luther responded with a bit of his famous wit and sarcasm, saying, "Where was God before the world came into existing? God was building hell for such presumptuous, fluttering, and inquisitive spirits as you are."

Now I don't recommend responding like that to a child who repeatedly inquires about something beyond their and our knowledge.

But Luther being Luther, that is how he responded to this young philosopher who kept pestering him with this question.

"God was building hell for such presumptuous, fluttering, and inquisitive spirits as you are."

So what would Luther make of our speculating, our hypothesizing about what heaven is like?

PAUSE

Now, personally, I think it is good for us to be inquisitive.

I think it is good for us to ask questions, even annoying questions, even questions that may not have an absolute, definitive answer.

I think it is good for us to ask questions about things like what heaven is like.

In fact, scholars suggest that much of the book of Genesis in the Bible can be described as a big book of answers to the question of "why".

And we can almost imagine, can't we, a child asking their parents all these "why" questions?

"Why is there a rainbow in the sky?" And parents would answer by telling their child about the story of Noah and the Flood, and how God set a bow in the sky as a sign that he would not flood the earth again.

"And why do animals run away from us?" And parents would answer by telling their child about Adam and Eve and how they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and as a consequence, sin entered the world, and subsequently enmity emerged between animals and humans.

"And why is there night time and day time?" And parents would answer by telling their child about the Creation Story and how God created light and separated the light from darkness, and made the first day.

Yes, the book of Genesis can be understood as a book that answers that repeated question "why".

So obviously, our ancestors of the faith understood questions to be part of life.

They understood that we humans like to inquire, like to search for meaning, even like to speculate and hypothesize, and delve into matters beyond our knowing.

But, Luther I think had a point when he rebuked that young philosopher.

Sometimes speculation and hypothesizing can go a little too far.

Now, what do I mean by that?

Well, it is one thing to speculate and hypothesize about what heaven is like.

Indeed, we can speculate and hypothesize to the point until we become blue in face...

We can imagine and imagine some more what heaven is like, AND never live into the heaven God wants for us.

Let me say that again, we can sit around and talk about what heaven is like forever, AND never actually live into the heaven God's wants for us.

Another way to say that, "The road to heaven is NOT paved by speculation, by hypotheses, by conjectures."

No, the road to heaven is NOT paved by discussing what heaven I like.

Instead, the road to heaven is paved by living out the vision of heaven God's wants for us.

And to say it still another way, we should live such that heaven is not a surprised.

We should live such that heaven is not a surprised.

Now, the bible passage that speaks to me most profoundly when speaking about what heaven is like, is 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, which says these words:

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who RECONCILED us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of RECONCILIATION; that is, in Christ, God was RECONCILING the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of RECONCILIATION to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us..."

And the word that repeatedly emerges here is reconciliation.

You see, God desires that God's people would be one.

God desires that we, as God's people, would be reconciled to one another and to God.

And that is not always easy by any means, I know it is not for me personally. I struggle with that. I struggle with reconciliation.

It is not easy to be reconciled to estranged family members or former friends.

It is not easy to be reconciled to neighbors or fellow Christians with whom we have had a parting of ways.

It is hard work. It is messy work. It is uncomfortable work. It takes time—it often can't be rushed, for it often takes a lot of healing. But it is the most important thing we do.

And we can think about what Jesus had to do to reconcile the world to himself, suffering and dying on the cross.

Reconciliation is not easy, and in the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, it required nothing short of a gruesome and painful death.

God's vision of heaven is not easy. It is downright hard.

And it is one thing to talk about what heaven is like.

It is another thing altogether to live out the vision of heaven that God wants for us, that being reconciliation.

But again, I reiterate, we should live such that heaven is not a surprise.

And I say that. I say that we should live such that heaven is not a surprise, not only because we don't want to be taken off guard.

We don't want to find ourselves in heaven thinking to ourselves, this is NOT what I thought heaven would be like at all.

And then we think, "This is not what I bargained for. Get me out of here."

And so, we should live such that heaven is not a surprise because by the time we obtain heaven the hard work of reconciliation is hopefully all but done, because

my fear anyway is that God in God's immense goodness and justice, will not let us off the hook.

My fear anyway is that reconciliation will have to be done here or in the hereafter.

There will be no way around it. And that is why we are tasked with working on reconciliation right now.

PAUSE

You see, when I stop and think about heaven, I struggle with this notion that our world and all its peoples, with all of our brokenness and conflict, will suddenly be transformed instantaneously at the end time, and all will be made right.

I would hope and pray that that would be the case—that the hard work might be glossed over.

But think about it. How does the present world of pain and sin suddenly become redeemed at the end time, so as to be a world of joy and gladness?

There is something missing in between. There is a disconnect there, between this world and the heaven that we envision.

It is almost as if we would be transformed and not even recognize ourselves and others anymore, because we would be so suddenly changed.

So, if we do believe heaven is about reconciliation, as our Lord says, then we ourselves must have some investment in that process now or later, otherwise heaven is a fairytale place, a place we won't recognize.

We should live such that heaven is not a surprise. We should live into the vision of heaven as a place of ultimate reconciliation with one another and God.

And, thanks be to God, God in Jesus Christ has given us the ultimate example of what that reconciliation looks like.

We are to learn from our Lord's example, and we are to grow into our call as ambassadors of reconciliation in this life, and come the day when heaven breaks in, it will be for us, just another day for you and me in paradise.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.