

# *A Heaven on Earth*

In a recent United Church Observer, Thomas Reynolds, an associate professor of theology at Emmanuel College, wrote a column entitled 'What is heaven?' He said "if we take the goodness of creation and our embodied human lives seriously, we may need to imagine heaven differently. This does not mean we need to deny the afterlife. However, heaven is not "up there" or outside earthly life. Rather, it is a state of being, an ideal way of being in immediate loving relation with God, neighbour and creation."

I think heaven is not a location. Heaven is about loving relationships; a loving relationship with God and a loving relationship with others. You deserve heaven here and now if you want to live harmoniously with God and with others. In that sense, I wonder if you have ever felt heaven on earth; when you feel connected to someone or nature; when you know that we are not alone, and that you are a part of everything; when you feel that there is somebody or something that always helps you, loves you and stands by you.

For example, when I was walking in Roberts Memorial Park near Yellow Point with my son, Peace, I felt a deep connection to him and to nature at the same time. At that moment, I knew that we were not separated from each other; nature, my son and I were one in harmony, and were from the same origin, God. My son must have felt something like that, because he was so calm and peaceful in that place.

When we had a retreat a couple of weeks ago, I felt deep trust, care and love among us. When I have bible study with the lectionary bible study group on Tuesday morning and with the men's bible study group on Tuesday evening, I am nurtured by everyone's wisdom, insight and faith, and I see the beauty that God has given to every person.

Those kinds of moments give me a chance to receive a glimpse of heaven, and help me to engage more and more in my loving relationship with God and with others. I believe that God invites us to live heaven in the

here and now. It's not just God's responsibility for us to experience such a heaven, it's our responsibility too. Sometimes, however, it's a challenge for us to find a heaven; because not every circumstance makes us happy, not every relationship gives us joy, and not every hardship leads to a happy ending.

So, I am glad that Jesus taught us to pray "your will be done on earth as in heaven", because it reminds us of both our responsibility and our hope. As we pray to God that "your will be done" not only with words but also with action, discerning and following God's will, we accept our role to make a difference to the world together with God. While we pray like that, we always have hope because we believe that God's will was fulfilled through Jesus, and that the same God is with us in life, in death and in life beyond death.

Maybe that's what Jesus was trying to show us with today's story: the ever-present God. Sadducees were trying to drive Jesus into a corner with a tricky question, in order to show people that he was not trustworthy. They thought that Jesus did not believe in the Torah, because his preaching was not entirely guided by that book. According to the Sadducees, there was no doctrine of resurrection of the dead nor belief in angels in the Torah. So they must have been surprised to find Jesus supporting the hope of resurrection from that same Torah. Jesus said, "The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

That might have caused some discomfort to the Sadducees – like many religious leaders, they were more comfortable with the dead being in a completely different realm, rather than alive, present, possibly ready to give comment on the leadership of the day. When they asked their question about the resurrection, they weren't really asking about heaven – they were hoping to trip Jesus up with an arcane question about the rules of the afterlife. His response tripped the Sadducees up with a rational interpretation of the Torah's words – why worry about a future resurrection when the dead have already risen?

According to Jesus, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not denizens of a richly remembered heritage but citizens of a new age characterized by the resurrection of the dead. God does not say, "Once upon a time long ago I used to be the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, but now they are dead and gone, though I remember them with great fondness." No. God speaks in present tense to announce that God was, is, and continues to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Jesus concludes, "For to God all of them are alive".

So I think the difference between the Sadducees and Jesus in today's story is not just whether they believed in resurrection but whether they could see the living God who was beyond the Torah. I don't think Jesus was trying to convince them that resurrection was possible; he wasn't trying to show them what heaven looks like. Instead, he was telling them who God is: the God who never lets relationships lie dormant, even with the dead. God eternally seeks relationship with everyone and everything.

The God who called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, calls you and me to a loving relationship as well. As they participated in a new life with God, we can also participate in a heaven here and now with God's promise that was already given to our brothers and sisters in faith. May our every relationship and every day be full with the love of God.