

The Believers, Part VIII

"New Beginnings Are Forever"

Revelation 21:1-14



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In Hebrew numerology numbers have symbolic meaning: 7 is the number for the divine, and 6 is the number of humans, 4 is the number of earth, and 12 is the number for completion. Another number that is less common in the bible is the number 8, which is the number for new beginnings. Today, we take our eighth and final look at "The Apostle's Creed" with this sermon I have entitled "New Beginnings Are Forever." You will notice that a similar thing is built into our musical structures. Every eighth note in the major scale is a new beginning. It is called by the same name, but it is different, higher by an octave. One of the newer songs in our hymnal, the "Hymn of Promise" sings "In our end is our beginning..." It is a movement from life in one dimension to another. It is still life, eternal life, but it is a different life just the same. The Apostle's Creed concludes, "I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Yes, we're going to be talking about heaven today, but it is anything but "other worldly." For you see, once you get a clear picture of eternity, then you are ready to truly live now.

Let's begin with "the communion of the saints." We believe some pretty bold things as Christians. We believe that one man's death bought salvation for the whole world. We believe that the same man rose from the dead and lives in you and me by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we believe that when we die, the eternal life we began to know on earth finds its completion in heaven. It takes holy imagination to be a believer. I don't mean that we conjure things up. But it does mean we acknowledge the existence of the supernatural and the extraordinary in life, dimensions we generally don't see right now. We celebrate the communion of the saints every November 1st, but today I invite you to notice, the next time you go past Kingsgate Shopping Center on 82nd Street, a certain cigar and gift shop called "Heroes and Legacies." When you see their sign, instead of thinking cigars and gifts, think "communion of the saints."

We have a long list of heroes. A casual reading of Hebrews 11 and 12 will get you started. We began our Father's Day service singing, "Faith of our fathers, living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword." Every lasting group has heroes from which it draws purpose, inspiration and resolve. As Americans, we draw on heroes like George Washington, Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, FDR and Martin Luther King, Jr. A list of heroines beginning with Betsy Ross, Dolly Madison and Harriet Tubman come immediately to mind. As Christians sharing Christ in a new day in new ways, we draw on pioneers like Abraham, daring liberators like Moses, powerful and resilient leaders like the apostle Paul, and reformers for whom the church had no room like Martin Luther and John and Charles Wesley. We could add Sarah, Esther, Mary, Joan of Arc, Methodist Susannah Wesley, and Pentecostal Aimee Sample McPherson as more examples. We then have heroes that are closer to us and dearer to our hearts that commune with us beyond time and space, giving us strength and inspiration to carry on our mission as the Church and as individual Christians. The world may characterize Christians as weak and passive, but that is not what our history shows. Our heroes were killed for sport in the Roman Coliseum, burned at the stake and sometimes cast off from the church when it became stuck in its thinking and methods. Ask Huss, Wycliff, Galileo, Luther and the Wesleys. We are a courageous daring lot and we have the heroes to prove it, chief among them the greatest daring and loving hero of them all, Jesus the Christ.

At the same time, the communion of the saints reminds us that we have a legacy. Just as we are building on the foundation that others have laid, so will a new generation build on us. Paul writes that we must then be

careful to build a legacy that lasts – not a legacy built on the trite or the temporary, but that is built on the grace of God and life changing power of God’s Spirit. I am keenly aware that this generation of United Methodists (the ones alive during the next twenty years) will determine whether we become revived and newly relevant or whether we become a wonderful memory of what once was. Which will be our legacy? At the same time, we must be careful to build not on the latest fad, but boldly in contemporary ways proclaim that which like Jesus will be here yesterday, today and forever. We have heroes and we are called to have a lasting legacy in Christ, which means there will have to be a new generation of heroes. I have noticed that most heroes, including all of those we have mentioned today, never decided to be heroes. They simply chose to be faithful and daring under the leadership of God’s Spirit. History then called them heroes. The writer of Hebrews says powerfully in 11:13. **“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.”**

Are we willing to make that same kind of investment, that same kind of sacrifice, even though we are not sure how it will all turn out? Our heroes chose to do just that. Now the choice is ours.

“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” I don’t know why this is here, except to remind us that our work as Christians is to be one of reconciliation. We become reconciled to God in Christ and encourage others to do the same. We learn how to forgive one another and we encourage others to do the same. Again, the world sees this as weakness, but forgiveness and reconciliation are truly the most needed strengths in the world. The Meminger Clinics says that unresolved guilt, regret and hostility is involved in 75% of mental-emotional illness. The forgiveness of sins can be big. Now consider what international guilt, regret and hostility is costing us in lives, in money that is spent on conflict instead of on those in need, and in lost talent and ingenuity. The forgiveness of sins can be huge. How can we learn and reconcile? In heaven, those who differ will all be together. Our time on earth is when we’re supposed to be practicing that. Two weeks ago, I said it was time “to get back in the game.” But as the Dallas Mavericks and the Miami Heat will tell you, you get in the game so that you can get to a greater series of games. All the rest is preparation for that. We practice reconciliation and daring and holy faith in preparation for the greatest game of all, the game of eternal life.

“I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15 that the resurrection of Jesus is just the first yield of millions and billions who follow. Sometimes I must confess that I have doubts about that. It just seems too good to be true. A pastor was confronted by a parishioner with similar doubts. The parishioner said, “Can I be a Christian and have my doubts about heaven?” The preacher said, “I guess you could. But if when you die, God surprises you with that gift, would you take it?” The parishioner said, “Indeed, I would.” None of us knows what heaven looks like or feels like. We just know that God has promised it. And that’s the bottom line for me. While I have my questions about heaven at times, I have no question about the grace and the promises of God. God has promised it – that in the end of this life there is indeed a great surprise – something greater than we can describe or even dream. To that I say to God, “Bring it on.” In the words of John in Revelation, “Even so, Lord Jesus come.”

Our scripture lesson from Revelation 21 describes “everlasting life” powerfully as a whole new dimension in which there is a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem (a holy city of God), a triumphant Church described as the bride of the Lamb, and a whole new world order. The wording is spectacular as John strains to describe the beauty of this holy city. Don and Mona have a chorus they share that sings, “Heaven is better than this.” Indeed, in ways impossible to describe, the life everlasting is beautiful. And here is the other part. The dimensions of this city are just as remarkable. Again, John strains to describe how massive the Holy City is. There is a message there. There is room there for everybody. Hell and the lake of fire were meant for the devil and his demonic angels, not for people. So each day we are given the opportunity to help people find Christ and a way out of the

hell they are in and headed toward, so that they can receive the surprise of eternity in the life they are in and in the life to come.

When we are traveling on vacation, there is usually sometime when we get miserably lost. So I stop in at a convenience store or even stop some poor soul on the street and I tell them, “We are lost as can be.” What is the first question they ask in return? “Where are you headed?” So I tell them. Some then tell us they have no idea where that is or how to get there. They have that “nobody’s home” look because they can’t help. But then there are those travel angels, some with cigarettes in their mouths, and four letter adjectives and grease on their hands who say, “I know where that is. Let’s go out here to the corner and I’ll show you which way to take.” Friends in Christ, there are people all around us who are miserably and hopelessly lost. They are going around in circles and getting more lost and frustrated by the moment. They tell us they’re lost in so many ways – with fake smiles, angry hearts, and trapped in a hell they cannot get out of. Some are what the world calls rich and some are poor. Some are easy to love and some are not. In fact they look like us B.C., that is before Christ, before eternity became part of our lives. And we are those imperfect folks with dirty hands who know the way. We join them where they are and we show them where to turn, and, if necessary, draw them a map that leads from a deadly existence to “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” We share with them the hope that is ours in Jesus, the hope of believers. And that takes us back to the beginning, the new beginning that is forever.