

HOPE IN DESPERATE TIMES
Sermon for Pentecost 8A, Proper 12—Mt 13:31-33, 44-52
LPC, 7/30/17

In the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, a dead baseball player who has returned to life to play ball on a beautiful new baseball diamond that has, improbably enough, been built in an Iowa cornfield, asks, “Is this heaven?” “No,” comes the reply, “It’s Iowa.”

As a parable of heaven, this one’s actually not too bad. This character sees the ballfield as the fulfillment of his dearest dreams. Is that how you conceive of heaven? As the fulfillment of your dearest dreams? Let’s take a look at what the Bible says about heaven.

In the Old Testament, heaven is of course described as God’s creation, and as God’s dwelling-place, although God does not appear to be confined there. God does, for example, accompany the people of Israel in their wanderings, and is also said to dwell in the Ark of the Covenant.

In the Old Testament, heaven is also represented as the ultimate destination of the particularly blessed. In 2 Kings for example, the prophet Elijah is taken into heaven on a chariot of fire, in lieu of experiencing bodily death.

By the time we get to the prophet Isaiah, heaven takes on the quality of an end to all suffering. This is understandable since the Book of Isaiah was written at a time of suffering for the Hebrew people. Isaiah was written for a people who desperately needed a hopeful vision. Heaven here becomes a vision of hope for people in desperate times. Isaiah is where we see the “God will wipe away every tear” language that will recur in the Book of Revelation.

Revelation, of course, was written much, much later, and describes heaven variously as a heavenly city, a heavenly banquet, a new creation, and the consummation of God’s work in the world. Like the Book of Isaiah before it, Revelation is also providing a vision of hope for people in desperate times.

Jesus, of course, speaks a great deal about heaven. Jesus is inclined to use the expression “the kingdom of heaven,” or “The kingdom of God.” In our Sunday lectionary, we are in the midst of an extensive bit of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven. This is the third Sunday in a row that we hear Jesus tell parables about what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Remember two weeks ago we learned that the kingdom of heaven is like a sower spreading seeds over all kinds of receptive and unreceptive soil. Last week we heard about weeds being sown among the good seed. This week we hear about a mustard seed, some yeast, some treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, and a net full of good and bad fish, all used as illustrations of what the kingdom of God is like.

From these stories we learn about features of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven reaches everywhere, even into the most inhospitable places, and regardless of how receptive people seem to be, the kingdom of heaven will multiply and prevail. For a while, evil will be perceived mixed in with God’s kingdom, but God will sort it out in the end. In the meantime, the kingdom will grow and flourish from the most modest of beginnings, like the

mustard seed and the tiny measure of yeast. The kingdom of heaven will be more rewarding for those who pursue it than anything else we can dream of, like the treasure in the field or the pearl of great price. And once again, God will sort it all in God's good time, like the fish in the net. The victory of God is sure.

These are all images of hope. Jesus is providing a message of hope for a desperate people. Writing decades later, Matthew's audience is also a desperate people in need of a vision of hope. The kingdom of God is a message of hope in desperate times. Across decades. Across centuries.

Insofar as we, in the twenty-first century in relatively prosperous America, have difficulty with this images of heaven, could it be that we are too comfortable? Not desperate enough? Swiss scholar Ulrich Luz seems to think so. Luz's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew says, "In the pleasant lounge, the hope of the kingdom cannot be understood." New Testament professor Eugene Boring suggests that those who are prosperous can understand the kingdom of heaven parables only "in solidarity with those who know the meaning of hope, because they recognize the limitations of their own power."

If I read Professor Boring correctly, he is not just suggesting that Christians who live in comfortable circumstances identify somehow with desperate and powerless people, which implies some sort of charity or service. I do believe that is part of our calling as followers of Jesus, since that is what Jesus did. But I do not believe that is all.

Those of us who are comfortable have just a great a need for a vision of hope as those who are desperate and powerless. Our primary challenge is just somewhat different. Those who are desperate and powerless need to capture the vision of hope despite their desperation and powerlessness. Those who are comfortable need to capture the vision of hope despite their comfort and power.

When we are comfortable and have some control over our lives it is easy to believe that we are fine, thank you, and don't need any help. This is an illusion. We tend not to see how illusory our self-sufficiency is until something goes wrong, over which we have no control. Then we too feel desperate and powerless. But in the state of desperation and powerlessness we are particularly open to the hope represented by the kingdom of heaven.

The fact is, none of us is entirely free from desperation and feelings of powerlessness. These are uncomfortable conditions to face into, but when we do we discover in ourselves our own huge need for hope: hope for the triumph of goodness, hope for some meaning in our lives, hope for an end to suffering: our own and that of others. And insofar as we are people living in desperate times (or believe ourselves to be) we need a vision of hope no less than Jesus' original disciples, or Matthew's original audience.

The kingdom of heaven holds out this hope. It is there. It is sure. Jesus' parables encourage us to keep believing, keep hoping, keep working for the kingdom and keep loving and forgiving even when it seems like we are making little headway. The kingdom of heaven is as real as Iowa, as real as baseball. I daresay it is even realer. All these things shall pass away, but the kingdom of heaven is forever.

