

This is the second in a Lenten series entitled “The Seven Last Words of Christ.”

“Today you will be with me in Paradise”

By Adam H. Fronczek

Just a couple of years into my ministry, I received a very nice phone call from a member of my church. “Adam, we’d like for you to officiate our wedding.” This is always a pleasure. But this phone call continued, “Adam, our wedding is in Grand Cayman.” What a treat! And it was—the resort was beautiful, the wedding was great fun and the couple’s family and friends were all so nice. At the couple’s invitation, I stayed on for a couple of days after the wedding, laid on the beach, went diving. It was...Paradise! After several days of Paradise, I was ready to come home. I was traveling alone, and I’ve never been that great at making fast friends. I can enjoy a nice resort as much as the next guy, but I’ve always been a bit uncomfortable having another human being wait on me hand and foot. It was very generous of the couple to insist on paying my way, but at some point, there’s a little jealousy and bitterness that comes with enjoying a vacation you know you could never pay for yourself. It was paradise, and I have no regrets...I enjoyed it for the time I was there; I just got restless...I wouldn’t have wanted it to last forever. I’ve felt the same way on other great vacations: a week I spent in Istanbul with a little room overlooking the Blue Mosque and the Bosphorus. On safari in Namibia with graduate school friends. Riding a Harley-Davidson down the Pacific Coast Highway. I’ve been blessed with some great experiences, but usually by the time they’re done, I’m ready to come home. Regardless of how much it’s like paradise, most of us eventually find things we’d like to change or we start missing someplace else. People just get restless.

If you spend enough time talking to religious people, eventually the idea of paradise will come up, and the question about Paradise seems to be, “what is it?”

A vacation at the beach?

Streets paved with gold?

“Heaven” by any definition—even if we’re not sure how to define it?

Is there any such thing as Paradise or is it just an idea?

Is there one ideal definition or could it be different for everyone?

Is paradise about eternity—does it go on forever; and if so, is there anything so good that you would really want it to last...forever?

Even with all of these unanswered questions, it seems like Paradise must be something pretty good—good enough that our spirits are lifted when Jesus turns to the criminal suffering beside him on the Cross, the one who believes in him, and says, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” This must be good news. This man next to Jesus is a criminal, after all; and he’s waited until the very end of his life to repent. Maybe there is hope for the rest of us, we who have made our own mistakes or who are still not so sure if we believe.

So Paradise is good news, and yet still the question remains—what is this Paradise of which Jesus speaks?

For all the attention that many religious people give to heaven, from visions of pearly gates and streets paved with gold to vague statements about “going to a better place,” the Bible says surprisingly little on the subject. This word Paradise Jesus uses in today’s Scripture lesson only comes up two other times in the New Testament; one of them when Paul briefly describes the visionary experience of someone he knows (2 Cor 12); the other time is at the end of the Bible in the Book of Revelation (Rev 2), where there is a reference made to the tree of life—this is a reminder at the end of the Bible of how it all began back in Genesis. (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina*).

Craig Barnes is a theologian and minister, and the President of Princeton Seminary. He thinks the Paradise we hope is awaiting us off in the future has something to do with that tree of life back in Genesis and the garden of Eden—the Paradise we left back at the dawn of Creation.

In the beginning, God creates the world and calls it good. It is paradise, Barnes says, because there, human beings live at home with God. Then, Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of life and they are expelled from the garden—they no longer live at home in paradise. Following those first three short chapters in Genesis, everything else in the Bible is a recovery plan. The rest of the Bible is the story of God sending Moses and the Law, and then the prophets, and then Jesus...all to help us as we try to navigate this journey we are now taking; a journey outside the safe walls of the garden, away from paradise, hoping that one day we will find our way home.

Interestingly, Barnes notes that even in the garden, back in paradise, there was this tree of life, “something forbidden in the middle of the garden that we couldn’t have. How could it be paradise, [he wonders], if we do not have it all? It is striking that the creation narratives make a point of telling us that this forbidden fruit was in the midst of the garden and not off in some forgettable corner. This means we were created to live with an unavoidable reminder that home [--paradise--] was never meant to be perfect, whole, or complete. That’s God’s idea of a good creation... [The tree of life] was meant to serve as our altar of prayer, where we could bend our knees and confess that we were mere creatures who were never meant to have it all, but were dependent on our Creator, who alone is whole and complete. That pristine, sacred communion was precisely what made the garden so good.” (Barnes, *Searching for Home*, 13)

The takeaway seems to be that, perhaps even at home in the garden, the definition of paradise is allowing God to take care of us. Paradise is being at peace with things that are beyond our control. Here outside the garden, but even back inside of it, we have to learn how to live in the midst of our imperfections, to make peace with the ways in which we are not God. We have to learn to give thanks for the good life that we have, even though we do not have it all.

That seems like a good reminder to us, for we live in culture that is obsessed with wholeness. Every fitness plan and all-natural diet promises wholeness. So does every move up the professional or economic ladder, every addition to family life, every move from one home to another, one city to the next...so many things in life, right down to the products on the shelf, they all seem to promise wholeness, they all promise to complete you. I cannot tell you how many pastoral conversations contain some idea of a search for wholeness—the hoped for spouse who will take away your loneliness, the newborn child who will fix your marriage, the bigger or renovated house, the next rung on the corporate ladder and the pay bump that comes with it, all of these are seen as a way to wholeness—a wholeness that does not exist, certainly not here outside of Eden. And yet it is so enticing; it is our favorite lie we tell ourselves—that there must be a way in this life to get to wholeness and to make life’s imperfections go away. Sadly, even the church often participates in the lie. Anytime you’ve gotten the suggestion that if you only join this service opportunity or that Bible study; if you pray a little harder or believe a little more, if you do these things, you will feel whole and complete—sometimes the church creeps into saying these things, and the Bible does not make that promise. The importance of faith is that it helps us to navigate the journey and to one day find our way back home; but the Bible never promises to make our problems all go away.

So the challenge worth pursuing seems to be not the quest for wholeness, but the ability to make peace with the wholeness we cannot have, and to learn to appreciate the gift of each day in this life—and to make the most of it. I will not claim to fully understand how this works from my own experience, but I do see signs of it quite frequently, especially in the lives of some of our older adults, especially when they are nearing the end of life—when they are closest to going home again.

Many of you will remember Dottie Cowan who died last year. In the months before she died, I had a visit with her in the hospital that I won't soon forget. It had been an extended stay in the hospital, without the capability to get out of bed much, and one day Dottie said to the nurse, "Who is that man who drives the big floor sweeper up and down the hall? Please tell him that I'd like it very much if he would come in and visit me and tell me about how that machine works." The very next day, around the time of shift change, the nurses came in to clear away the extra furniture and trays, and that man drove the floor sweeper into the room and stopped it right next to Dottie's bed. They sat there together talking for about an hour, Dottie asked all about the machine, and the gentleman who drove it, who had never been asked such questions before, at least not at work. And the next day the nursing staff told Dottie that when the man left her room that day he was overcome with emotion—he had never had anyone express that kind of interest in the work he did, day after day; he felt so valued and blessed and cared for by another person. In her deeply frail condition, Dottie was still able to do that for someone else.

I told that story because there's a pretty significant contrast between my restlessness in the paradise of Grand Cayman and Dottie's ability not only to make the most of the day, but to hand out blessings to someone else, from a hospital bed.

Jesus does something like that. Even hanging on the Cross, he is handing out blessings. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise is a vision we can only imagine, and it presents us with many more questions than answers. But one truth seems clear, and there is a challenge that goes with it. We will not achieve wholeness in this life, for the paradise we seek is to be back at home with our God. And yet in the time that we have, we are given a chance each day to receive the gift of the day God has given us, and to share that gift with someone else. We do this so that they and we might feel a bit more of God's love along this journey—this journey that will one day lead us home. Amen.

Text:

Luke 23:43 "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise"