

“Heaven is Now”

1 Peter 1:3-9 and Excerpt from Experiences in Theology, Jürgen Moltmann

By Don Ludwig, April 25, 2021

Hoping to Stay Afloat

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind." "Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

A number of years ago researchers performed an experiment to see the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship. Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour they had all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. When that happened, the second set of rats swam for over 24 hours. Why? Not because they were given a rest, but because they suddenly had hope! Those animals somehow hoped that if they could stay afloat just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them. I can't help but think that if hope holds such power for unthinking rodents, how much greater is its effect on our lives.

Doing for Others

What you do to further life, to bring hope to another person, to reach down and rescue, to make a difference for someone else, will bring “a little heaven” into your life . . . right now. I am convinced that heaven is not the image of streets paved with gold and marble columns that welcome the saintly believers. Heaven is the state of happiness you find when you lift a person's spirit for a few minutes each day! Jesus said often enough, “The kingdom of heaven is now!”

In the passage from First Peter that Sue read for us this morning we hear this sentiment loud and clear. Because Jesus is alive to us today, we have been given a brand-new way to live and we have everything to live for – a “life healed and whole” as the text says – a life filled with hope and happiness. The future is now, Peter admonishes. It seems to me, after 55 years of being on this planet, that life healed and whole only comes to us through one thing: doing for others -- in bringing hope where there is little or no hope.

There was another study done, not long ago, that examined happiness. A large group of people was asked to rate themselves on a “happiness scale”. The group was then randomly divided into two groups of economically and demographically similar people. Each person was then given ten dollars. One group was told that they had to spend it on themselves, it was theirs – they could do what they wanted – but they could only use it or keep it, they could not give it away or spend it on anyone else.

The second group was told they absolutely had to spend it on someone else, or use it in a way that would benefit another person and they had to do it themselves. They could not give it to a charity; they had to actually do something for another person, or buy something for another person and give it to them. Then at the end of the day they were all asked to complete the “happiness scale” again. In the group that spent the money on themselves, there was little or no change; and what change there was, was negative. Whereas, in the group that had to seek out a way to help someone else, everyone was happier at the end of the day!

There are a lot of people in the world today who, while they will continue to always claim to have found a “savior” in life, never lift a finger for another person. They wait, they plan, they look forward to an eternal bliss – when they could have found happiness . . . now. Heave is now. Heaven is what we do in this moment. Hope is now! Hope is what we do in this moment. I don’t know for certainty what lies over the threshold of death and I suspect that none of you do either. If you do, please call me and fill me in. But I do know that tomorrow I can find a bit of heaven by doing a kind deed today and providing hope for another person.

I love the story from *Parade* magazine that came out a while ago about a self-made millionaire Eugene Land, who greatly changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem. Mr. Lang had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth-graders. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? He wondered how he could get these predominantly black and Puerto Rican children even to look at him.

Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." At that moment the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school.

Do Whatever You Can

We may not have millions of dollars at our disposal to give, but we all have privilege in so many ways. Jurgen Moltmann offers up a litany of things we can do to further enhance our lives and bring hope to others – today! Spreading reverence for life, healing broken relationships, seeking the sacred in all things; building up life and offering *Hope* to others.

Part of my job at Clark College is to be a mediator between students and professors in times of conflict or complaint. This past Friday, I met with a middle aged black woman for over an hour. She had some very valid complaints about being treated inequitably by one of her professors. So many micro-aggressions were assaulted at her in the online classroom and class Zoom meetings. It was heartbreaking. I listened. I validated her experience. I let her know what Clark College is doing to train and equip all staff and faculty to be more and more culturally aware and able to act

and speak inclusively toward all; I also shared with her that unfortunately not all faculty participate in these trainings. In my role, I have very little power to take action with tenured professors, only make recommendations.

But I will forever be bolstered by the words of this student: she said “*Dr. Ludwig, I want to thank you. Thank you for giving me hope. Thank you for listening and seeking to understand me. Even though you can't do much about it, I now have hope for Clark College. Thank you.*”

Friends, the foundations we build our futures on, are found in being hope to each other. Listening well. Seeking to understand. Never forgetting those victims of the Oregon fires of 2020. Learning to be more culturally aware. Making Black Lives really Matter in the aftermath of the George Floyd trial! The heaven that people seek does not lie over the threshold of death; but lies, instead, where God is – in any community of people gathering together to make the world a better place for everyone.

Like those laboratory rats in separate tubs of water, there are many people just struggling to stay afloat these days. But they have hope. They hope for us to come along and lift them up. Even if it is only short term relief until long term solutions can be found, the hope we give today will make a difference for someone's tomorrow. That is how it is in heaven!

Amen.