

New Testament lesson – Acts 7:54-60  
Gospel lesson – John 14:1-14

### So – What Happens?

This sermon is about heaven, so I'm going to take a page from Joel's sermon design and begin with a joke. I've adapted it a bit from the original form I saw, in honor of this being an election year.

In life there are only two things to be worried about: whether you're well or whether you're sick. If you're well, there's nothing to worry about. If you're sick, there's only two things to worry about: whether you get better or whether you die. If get better, there's nothing to worry about. If you die, there's only two things to worry about: whether you go heaven, or whether you go to hell. If you go to heaven, there's nothing to worry about.

If you go to hell, you won't have time to worry, because you'll be too busy shaking hands with politicians running for office.

During the period from Easter to Pentecost, the lectionary replaces the OT lesson with one from the book of Acts. I read an explanation for this which makes some sense. It is done to emphasize looking forward after the Resurrection of Jesus, rather than looking backward and recalling what has led up to this culmination of salvation history. Well, there is nothing more forward-looking than a glimpse into heaven, as we have in our reading from Acts.

However, in the material preceding this, Stephen summarizes the history of Israel and God's relationship with them, especially regarding the Temple. He points out that it was preceded by the tent of witness in the wilderness. Then Solomon built a "house for God," but Stephen reminds his audience that the prophet had told them that God can not be contained in a house. This was his defense against the charge that he had spoken against the Temple and the Law, saying that Jesus was going to change everything.

Considering what he said in his defense, the charges might well have been true. Then he concludes his offensive remarks by accusing the

hearers of being like their ancestors who persecuted and killed the prophets who foretold the Promised One. That would be Jesus, the man you just killed.

It is interesting how their reaction is described. The RSV simply says "they were enraged," but the King James may be closer: "*they were cut to the heart.*" That is a more literal translation of the Greek. I think the intent might be to show that they were indeed enraged, but also that their rage showed their hearts. Their hearts were laid open, and their hostile hearts moved them to act against Stephen and the truth.

Before they rushed at him, Stephen had a vision of heaven, where he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And that was the triggering comment. What he had said up to this point had been bad, but this crossed a line for them. They threw him outside the city, where they stoned him to death.

There are several things that make this story significant. For one thing, it is the first account of a Christian martyr. The word "martyr" comes from a Greek word that means "witness." Those whom we call martyrs, like Stephen, were Christians who were killed for bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. It still occurs today.

Another significant aspect of the story is the approving presence of a man named Saul. He held the garments of the witnesses, who, by law, had to be the first to throw stones at the accused. They laid their garments aside, presumably to make throwing easier, and perhaps also to prevent blood stains. I would suppose that stoning was both difficult work and a thoroughly messy business. Saul would later become the apostle Paul.

It is also an interesting story because it affords us that glimpse into heaven. Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. That is interesting because in three other places in the NT we are told that Jesus is *seated* at the right

hand of God. Why was he standing? Was he preparing to welcome the first martyr?

When Stephen died, the verse says, “he fell asleep.” Is that just a euphemism for dying? Or does it imply something about our condition after death?

I will not mislead you and say I have made an exhaustive study of the topic of “soul sleep.” That is the idea that when we die, our soul enters into a sleep state, and we are unaware of anything until the day of resurrection.

However, I think most people like to think that when we die we go straight to heaven, where we are in the presence of Jesus and God the Father. That is usually what I say at funerals and such, and it’s probably what I tend to believe. But I may be wrong. I know that comes as a shock to my wife, but it’s true. Well, to be fair, the shock is *admitting* that I may be wrong.

I think most people find it much more comforting to think of loved ones resting in God’s presence, waiting for us to follow. We find it more comforting than believing that they are simply not conscious of anything.

I think we can rest assured, though, that it really makes no difference to the person who is dead.

Sometimes I will wake up after being asleep for a while and think it must be a certain time. Often, I am way off, by 3 or 4 hours. When we’re asleep, our perception of passing time is simply not very good. Maybe you are different, but I think most people are like that. We simply do not realize how much time is passing when we are asleep.

So it would be with a soul sleep. They don’t know how much time is passing, so whether it’s twenty days or twenty years or twenty centuries until the resurrection, it’s all the same to them. Of course, the practical side of me thinks, if there is a soul sleep until the resurrection, that is going to make for a massive bottleneck at the pearly gates.

This idea also brings up another thing about which I am not entirely certain. Will we recognize other people in heaven? There is an old saying that we will be surprised by three things about heaven: who is there, who is *not* there and the fact that we are there. But those first two are what make me wonder about whether we will recognize other people. If we recognize someone we absolutely hated in this life, will we be transformed enough to love them in heaven? Or will we simply forget that we hated them? Or maybe we will simply not recognize them, so there will be no recollection of hatred.

In a similar way, will we realize that someone is not there? And if we are truly surprised, as the humorous saying goes, will it bother us? Will it maybe take away some of the joy we should feel? What if it is a family member who is missing?

I know Jesus said specifically that people will not be married in heaven. So we may or may not even recognize our former spouse, or anyone else. And so if someone has been married more than once, there will be no dispute about who gets to be the spouse in eternity.

Speaking of marriage and remarriage brings to mind the idea of divorce, which reminds me of C. S. Lewis’ wonderful book about heaven and hell, The Great Divorce. It’s a wonderful piece of speculation about a possible arrangement for heaven and hell.

If I recall the book’s premise correctly, when a person dies, they go to a sort of waiting area. It’s not all that pleasant, being around other people, and if a person so desires they can catch a bus that goes to heaven.

Once there, they quickly discover that the substance of heaven is much more solid than earth’s substance was. Grass can hurt the feet, and trying to wade in water is impossible. A person does not sink in the water, so moving water knocks them down and they will bump along on the surface of a stream. But if they stick with it, the person will sort of “toughen up” and

become used to heaven and eventually enjoy it there.

On the other hand, if they don't catch the bus to heaven, they will probably take the first opportunity to move away from the center of the waiting area. But they are still exposed to other unpleasant people, and everyone just keeps moving outward until they are completely alone, with no human contact whatsoever, and also no contact with God. By that point, it is too late for the bus.

Of course, as I said, it is speculation. Jesus spoke very plainly about a lake of fire as a place of eternal punishment in Matthew 25. Some people question why a loving God would make such a hell for people if he loves them. Here's the secret that most people miss: God did not do that. Right there in Matthew 25, Jesus said the "lake of fire" was prepared for the devil and his angels. People only end up there because they squandered the opportunity to go to heaven.

I mentioned earlier the three surprises we will have in heaven, and why the first two may not even be possible. What about the third surprise – we will be surprised because we are there. That should not be a surprise either.

I don't think I will be surprised at all to find myself in heaven. But it has nothing to do with being so arrogant as to think I deserve to be there. It's not because I have confidence in the good things I have done in my life. I know for sure that my sins would outweigh my good deeds. As Isaiah said, our sins make our righteous deeds like a polluted garment. If I have a glass of purified drinking water, and someone puts just a half a drop of strychnine into it, I'm not going to take even a sip of that water. It has been completely ruined. The average lethal dose for me, based on my weight, is less than one tenth of a milligram.

Sin is just as ruinous for our good deeds. So why would I not be surprised to make it into heaven? Because I have confidence in the promise of Jesus. Our gospel lesson contains that promise. He promised his disciples he was going

to prepare a place for them in his father's house. I really prefer the RSV on this one. The idea of many mansions in the King James Version makes it sound like everyone will have their own house to live in. But the Greek makes it sound more like Jesus is going to prepare guest rooms in his father's house for everyone, and the RSV better reflects that idea. I don't know about you, but I would much rather be a guest in God's house than have my own place. It's not like I'm going to need some place to store clothes or tools or a lawnmower.

And we know how to go there, and it has nothing to do with us or how many good deeds we have done or how much we have done for the church or... Fill in the blank with whatever wrong idea you might have about how one makes it into heaven. God does not need singers or musicians or new angels or "good people." Heaven is or will be populated by people who know they don't deserve to be there. They are there because Jesus showed them the way, as he showed Thomas and the other disciples: Jesus himself is the way. He is the door of the sheep. We enter heaven through him.

And there is the bottom line, really, about heaven. We don't really know much about heaven except that God is there, and Jesus is there. Are the streets really made of transparent gold? Revelation says they are, but so what? That just means gold is not very valuable if God uses it for pavement. And he made it transparent. I would think that would make it more valuable, but the abundance of jewels and precious metals in heaven means the real value of being there is being in the presence of God. And that is true of wealth on earth as well. There is true wealth in your life if you are living with Christ.

There is a lot about heaven that I don't know, a lot that I'm not sure about. But I know I will be going there because of the promise of Jesus and because of his work on the cross and because of his resurrection. I don't deserve it, but I'll take it. I know that I will spend eternity in the presence of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There will

be angels and other people, maybe I'll know who they are and maybe not.

I know what happens after I die. I don't know the details, and I don't know when. And you

know what? I'm not too worried about that. I'll take Jesus at his word, and we'll see exactly what happens. Amen.