**25 Pentecost, November 10, 2013;Haggai 1: 15-2:9; Ps 145; 2 Thess 2:1-17; Luke20:27-38;**

**Rev Mary Trainor**

What is going to happen when we die? Isn't this a question we all have? We really really want to know -- I say really, really because many millions of dollars have been spent buying recent books about heaven and NDEs (Near Death Experiences) -- this is a hot topic! It is a hot topic because we like to be in control, and we don't like uncertainty. And, this topic gives the most discomfort and uncertainty. So, we seek answers in books. One of the most popular books of the year is Dr. Eben Alexander's Proof of Heaven. He had a massive infection eating his brain, and in his "near death" time he says he experienced heaven. Another popular book from a few years ago, Heaven is for Real, is by a boy named Colton Burpo. Colton was actually dead for 3 minutes, and when he came back to life, and he was able to describe the glory of heaven and relationships there. He even shared what it was like to sit on Jesus' lap! Books like these do give us a greater sense of control and reduce our fear of death, but can we **be sure** that they are telling us is the truth? **No, we can't. Not yet.** So, the Good News today is that Jesus is alive reducing our uncertainty by telling us what heaven is like, it does not cost anything to learn about, and we can know for sure that it is the truth.

Wondering about what happens when we die is not just something contemporary. Back two thousand years ago people had this question too. In fact, our Gospel today tells us about some Jewish leaders asking Jesus about what it would be like in heaven for married people. These people, the Sadducees, did not, however, believe that there was any life after death. They knew Jesus had been teaching about eternal life, and now they were looking to trap him. [This was not long before the crucifixion]. They tried to trap him with a convoluted highly unlikely story that went like this: if a woman was married 7 times (because of being widowed six times) **who** would be her husband in heaven? Jesus, of course, kew these leaders' motive. So, He not only didn't get trapped, but He used their question to teach. Back then, family lineage determined your social standing, your occupation, your influence -- so they made the assumption that it would matter in heaven. Their question was based upon their earthly perspective. In His response, Jesus showed that things don't work in heaven the way they work on earth; He taught from a divine perspective. We are children of God, with God's lineage, so what matters to God is what you believe and how you live. So, will we be with our loved ones, our spouses, in heaven? Yes, but it will be even better than the best marriages! Jesus taught, "***those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are ... children of God***." Marriage is a thing of this world, and is not needed in heaven because perfect relationships there transcend those here on earth. Marriage is a sacrament that God is in the midst of, but it is just a taste of what is yet to come. In heaven we will see the face of Christ and around Him will be those who you love. And, as God's adopted child, you will be able to be closer to them there than you ever have been able to be here. This is what Jesus is saying. This is the divine mystery of perfect love.

The Bible tells us more about heaven. We know that heaven is a truly lush, relaxing place of natural beauty. A couple of chapters later in the Gospel of Luke (23:23) Jesus said to the thief on the cross "***you will be with me in paradise,***" giving us a picture of heaven -- for the translation of the word "***paradise***" is the "*beautiful walled garden of a King*." Rev 22: 1-5 tell us that this garden will have fruit laden trees and the sparkling crystal river of life running through it, and there will be no darkness - only light. We know from John 14:2 that it has ***many rooms*** and God ***has already prepared a place for us*** there; it is welcoming, hospitable, comfortable. In heaven we are treasured as unique individuals; this is not some mob scene where we are lost in the crowd. Heaven is a place of perfect ***love*** where there are ***no tears*** (Rev 21:4), and where our bodies are transformed and made whole (Phil 3:20). This is the truth, and this is what reduces our fears and increases our certainty. The Rev. Billy Graham, who just turned 95 this week, said this:"**I have a certainty about eternity...and I thank God for giving me that certainty. I do not fear death...because...the moment that my spirit leaves this body, I will be in the presence of the Lord."**

In the mid 17th Century a 35 year old named Richard Baxter was on his deathbed, preparing to meet the Lord. He meditated on heaven, drawing from the bible, and wrote a book called "The Saint's Everlasting Rest." Here are some of his words, "**To dwell in God's presence will be the ultimate blessing...we will experience the fullness of God and the ability to enjoy it perfectly, our redeemed soul and resurrected body in tandem...similar to a near sighted person suddenly having his or her sight restored. What was blurred or shadowy before now shines forth with perfect clarity."** We, from our earthly perspective, can't see the glory of heaven yet. As St. Paul says in 1st Corinthians 13:12: **"*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully."***  We **are** given a glorious peek at what heaven is going to be like through God's Word and through the sacraments. We know that we are to believe in Jesus (John 3:36), trust in the Lord, and live your life following Jesus. We don't need to have an NDE (near death experience) to anticipate with confidence the glory of heaven. As believers, we have the blessed assurance from Jesus that if we will have eternal life with Him.

A hymn writer named Fanny Crosby understood this in the depths of her heart. She wrote today's closing hymn: **Blessed Assurance**. Fanny became blind at six weeks old, but she lived to the age of 95. This hymn was inspired during a visit to her home by a musician. This musician had a tune in her head, but no words to go with the tune -- and so she played it, and soon the words flowed from Fanny's heart: ”**Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine. Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long....Angels descending bring from above Echoes of mercy, whispers of love**." Turn to Jesus with your uncertainties about what will happen when you die, turn to Jesus with your life, and He will give you His "blessed assurance." Amen.