

Windows into Heaven

Rev. John Allen

You might think that the world is just as it looks.

You might think that. You'd be wrong.

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Right around the corner from our old apartment in New York stood the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Some people in the neighborhood refer to it as St. John the Unfinished.

It's cornerstone was laid in 1892. And the work continues to this day.

Construction paused for both World Wars.

And it has moved slowly in part because the members of that Cathedral have always felt that their first responsibility was to take care of the many homeless and hungry people who live in their neighborhood.

Still, its an impressive space. Even unfinished.

When you step in the door, you are 601 feet —two football fields— from the pulpit.

The doors that you enter are so large that elephants can, and in fact have walked through them.

The ceiling is 125 feet over your head, the highest ceiling in any church in the United States.

And the sanctuary is enclosed with towering stained glass windows that make the room shimmer with dancing shards of colored light.

Standing in that room makes you feel small in the face of something majestic. It is humbling.

And being in that great sanctuary makes you feel like you are in another world entirely. The noise of Amsterdam Avenue outside seems like another planet.

I used to go there sometimes when I was a chaplain at St. Lukes hospital around the corner. It felt nice to be out of the world for a moment, and in such a holy place.

Perhaps you have been to St. John. Or perhaps you have been in other sacred places that are built to feel like heaven itself. Places that seem to transport you from the world outside right up to the very throne of God.

With incense, and stained glass that makes the world disappear behind grand images of the heroes of our faith.

Maybe that was the kind of church you knew your whole life long. The kind you had grown used to.

And then you walked in here.

Don't get me wrong, I love our Sanctuary.

But you wouldn't call it grand. It certainly doesn't transport you to another world or make you forget that you are standing on planet earth.

The furnishing is simple.

And the light in here is the same as it is out there.

No incense. Just us. Our bodies and our voices, in a simple, and beautiful room together.

And no stained glass. Just these big, plain, clear, windows.

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The little church that Jacob built out in the wilderness was simpler still.

Just a rock, stood up on end, with a little oil poured over the top.

In this morning's reading, Jacob is out in the wilderness, miles away from anyone or anything. And he lays down to rest for the night, taking a nearby boulder to use as a pillow.

As he sleeps. He dreams.

He dreams that he sees a giant ladder, planted in the earth before him with its top in the heavens.

And angels, going up, and coming down. Passing back and forth between heaven and earth.

And presumably, those angels coming down must be spreading out around him, mingling with those waiting to climb in a sea of light stretching to the horizon.

Such that this giant ladder is like a radiant spout of holiness flowing down from heaven and cascading throughout the wilds. Pouring God's own presence out into creation.

Jacob wakes up.

The rock is unchanged. The desert dust is gritty as before. The air is dry. The sky is just beginning to lighten with the day.

That is when Jacob realizes something.

Heaven and Earth are not two different places after all. The earth is crammed full of holiness.

“Surely God is in the place” he says. “I just hadn’t realized it.”

Surely God is in this place and I didn’t notice.

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Back here in Milton. In 1857, builders were hard at work on the Sanctuary in which you and I currently sit.

One of them, Jason S. Reed, carved his name into a post at the base of our steeple on May 31 of that year. You can still see if if you aren’t afraid of a few cobwebs and can do a little climbing. Let me know, I’ll

take you up there. If you prefer to keep your feet on solid ground, I can show you a picture.

Jason and his community were building this church, just the Sanctuary back then. Before the Parlor, before any of the offices or Huntington Hall. Just the room we are in.

There were churches being built all over Boston then with gorgeous stained glass. But this church opted for a very austere and simple style. And they went with the clear glass.

This was no mere aesthetic choice. It had deep significance for them.

The earliest builders of Congregational Churches built sanctuaries with clear glass because they did not want worshipers to forget the world outside. They did not want us to feel like we had been transported to heaven. They did not want to obscure the beautiful simplicity of sunlight with colorful glass.

They wanted you to be able to see the birds and bushes that Jesus was talking about as we listen to his parables.

They wanted you to be able to sing “Morning has broken” and feel the warm breaking light on your face.

They wanted you to remember that our faith does not call us to abandon this world but to return to it with the hope we nurture here. With the love we learn here.

The people who installed those windows are making a statement.

That God is all around us.

That God is in this place —in this world— even if we don’t realize it.

What is outside those windows is a better vision of heaven than any artist could create.

Heaven and Earth are not two different places after all. The earth is crammed full of holiness.

These windows, beloved, are windows into heaven.

Look through them. See the realm of God.

See the angels ascending and descending.

The holiness poured out in abundance.

These windows, beloved, are windows into heaven.

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And truly amazing thing is that it is not just these windows.

Every window you look out into this world is a window into heaven.

Every time you look out the front of your home, you will see something holy. If you really look.

Every time you look out the windshield of your car, if you pay attention, you can see the dwelling place of God.

Every time a someone peers through the lens of a telescope to glimpse the edges of the cosmos, they only look further into God's home.

Every time someone squints into a microscope to plumb the depths of smallness, they only see deeper into the heart of God.

Every time you put on your glasses, or just look out your own eyes. You are seeing God's world. You are seeing the place where angels dance. Where grace abounds. Where God's love has come to find a home.

Heaven is here. The kingdom of God is among us. Even now.

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When you see the world, you see heaven.

These windows are clear in order to inspire our awe and our gratitude.

But these windows are also clear in order to inspire our commitment.

Because when you look out these windows, you are seeing the place where God wants you and I to give it everything we've got.

This world and this lifetime is not just a place to tough it out until we reach some reward. But a place to work beside God to to make this world ever and ever more heavenly, by spreading love, breaking chains, hoping for what seems impossible.

So that even when our eyes grow dim, or should we no longer be able to see, we will hear heaven in the songs of birds, touch it in the

embrace of those we love, smell it in a familiar meal, know it in our very bones.

So that wherever we rest our heads, or lay our burdens down, we can awake to proclaim.

Surely God is in this place.

Surely God is in this place.

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Remember those words. Surely God is in this place. Remember those words not only when you are basking in beauty. But when you are staring down heartbreak and despair or walking in the valley of death's shadow.

When those words become not a bold proclamation, but a hopeful question. A sort of searching around in the dark.

Surely, surely, God must be in this place and I just don't see it.

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Jacob laid down in the desert.

The next morning he stood up in heaven.

He never moved. He didn't die.

He just woke up. Really woke up.

He looked. He saw. And suddenly everything was different.

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That's why Jason Reed — who carved his name into our rafters—
that is why Jason and his community installed these windows this

way. Truly. It was no accident. It was not an afterthought. It wasn't just because they liked the way it looked.

They wanted us to always remember what they knew so well.

Ordinary life is crammed full of holiness.

And heaven and earth are not really two different places after all.

You just have to look.