

2003-10-12 Heaven

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Opening Words

Once upon a time there was a woman who longed to find out what heaven is like. She prayed constantly, “O God, grant me in this life

She tiptoed while he snored, rarely disagreed.

I liked Grandma because she gave me cookies
and let me listen to the ocean in her shell.
Grandma liked me
even though my daddy was a Moslem.

I think Grandpa liked me too
though he wasn't sure what to do with it.
Just before he died, he wrote me a letter.

"I hear you're studying religion," he said.
"That's how people get confused.
Keep it simple. Down or up."

Sermon

As the children's story this morning (For Heaven's Sake/ Sandy Sasso) makes perfectly clear, *Heaven* is hardly a religious word

So how did *heaven* climb back up into the clouds?

Some Christian leaders did indeed teach that Heaven was going to be an era of justice and peace here upon earth. Others taught that heaven meant simply being absorbed into the presence of God, dazzled forever by the divine light. Heaven was not for company, they said. You wouldn't notice your own mother if she was next to you. No, heaven was rapturous solitude in the presence of the Great Solitary, God.

But the historical answer gets more complicated.

In the nineteenth century, here in America, with the rise of the mediums who claimed they could converse with the souls of the dead, the idea of Heaven as sort of an extension of THIS life became popular, even among some of our Universalist ancestors. According to popular piety, heaven was a place where you would

But I also have sympathy with those who live at the edge way beyond poverty and colonization...those who want to escape the hell they live in...gulag, a death camp, a racist prison system like the shameful one in our own country, the daily threat of genocide...by meditating on some heavenly redemption after this life. Those of us who live in decent homes along streets lined with shops are in no position to judge the appropriateness of the theology of those whose lives are actually threatened every single day.

here on earth, with their ordinary troubles. The pearly gates contrast with the peeling paint on the doors, and the walled garden of paradise seems far from the weeds that multiply in the tomatoes. The rapturous, steady light of God is a poor match for that porch light with a short in it. Poorly functioning families, filled with prejudice or a steaming anger that silences those sitting around the table, seem the direct opposite of the heavenly banquet where
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there. But I honestly don't think that focusing on such notions, which history proves to be so varied and so personal, is the sign of a spiritual life or religious life, if you will. For me, as the second reading summarizes so simply and beautifully, finding the paradise in our ordinary lives is far preferable to making lists of the golden furniture in heaven's mansions that will support us once we have

