

## Welcome Home

When Heather, Allison and I lived in London, Ontario, we would occasionally cross the border into Port Huron, Michigan to do some shopping. We always enjoyed our time in Michigan, but what made it especially enjoyable was the reception we often received from the U.S. border agents.

One incident we will never forget. At the border crossing, we showed our U.S. passports to the border agent and then told him that we were presently living in London, Ontario. The agent gave us a big smile and said, “Welcome home!” Heather and I have never forgotten that greeting. We knew when we crossed the border, we were home.

Home is where your heart is. Remember what Robert Frost said about home, “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Or Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, closing her eyes and saying, “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home...”

Wherever we now call home, we know that at some point we will say farewell, as we take our last breath. We will leave home at some point. No one sticks around forever. Then what?

What happens when we die? That’s a question we start asking ourselves, especially as we grow older and begin to have health issues.

Actor and film director Clint Eastwood is now 95 years old. I still remember him in *Rawhide* on television and those *Dirty Harry* and Spaghetti Westerns movies. When Eastwood was 81, he kept asking himself what happens when I die? And so, he wrote and directed the film *Hereafter*. It is a film that has resonated with audiences who are asking the question, “What’s next?” The film tries to answer that question by focusing on three geographically disparate people who have been traumatized by close encounters with death – a San Francisco psychic, a youngster from London mourning the death of his twin, and a Parisian-based journalist whose life changes after she is almost killed in the 2004 tsunami.

What the film suggests is that no matter where we were born, where we have been, where our travels have taken us, we all end up converging at the same

place. Eventually we must all pass-through death. Before we pass through it ourselves, we pass through it with any number of friends and loved ones. After weeks and months and perhaps even years of trying to avoid it, we must hold the hand of someone very dear to us and face that inevitable journey through the valley of the shadows.

For Christians we never pass through death alone. God is always with us, God is always present, God is there even as we take our last breath and bid this life farewell. Jesus assures us that God's love for us is larger than life and stronger than death. When God called each of us out of nothing into being, it was not a careless or irresponsible act, but rather the beginning of a process that God wants to go on forever. Quite simply, God who created us out of love will not abandon us out of love. If God made you, then God loves you. And God's love lasts forever.

In heaven we will experience God's love like we have never known it before. How will it be, I don't know. I can't describe it. Nobody can. The images in the Bible about heaven are all symbolic. The biblical writers are struggling to express the indescribable, to use the images of time and space to describe eternity. Every attempt falls short, to be sure. And yet, even in this life we can have glimpses of heaven, seeing imperfectly that which someday we will experience fully.

When I was eleven years old, a group of classmates and teachers climbed a mountain in upstate New York. About halfway up we stopped along this mountain creek churning down. Around us were the black-green trees, and the soft black-green moss on the rocks and banks. Out of the small brilliant blue patches of sky above came these shafts of white light which turned the splashing waters into showers of diamonds. It was an almost mystical experience, and I thought to myself, "In a place like this, it's very easy to believe in God." It was a glimpse of heaven.

One Easter Sunday when I was a college student in New York, I attended Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church near Columbia University. Corpus Christi is the church where Thomas Merton worshipped until he entered Gethsemani Abbey to become a monk. That Easter Sunday the choir sang a Palestrina Mass. As the polyphony of sounds intertwined with each other, built, and rebuilt, it took my breath away. I felt as if my heart, lungs, and stomach had come into the physical grip of God. The Easter message was mine! God really did raise Jesus from the dead! God did that. God tore that

rock away from the tomb and called forth Jesus of Nazareth and set him on high. I knew that. It really happened!

Sometimes glimpses of heaven happen in the most unexpected times and places. John Coburn, a former Bishop of Massachusetts, authored a marvelous little book titled *Grace in All Things*. He told about being on a battleship in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. Evening was falling after a long and grueling day on patrol. As the sun set over the calm sea, there was the thrilling tropical color that engulfed the ship. It was a moment of indescribable peace. God was around us, Bishop Coburn recalled. No one spoke – for amid war there was the wonder of eternity, written in the gentle waves, the glory of the sky, the peace of that quiet moment.

Glimpses of heaven – you could write yours. These are the moments that come to us only occasionally in this life, perhaps because we couldn't take them with much more frequency. They are moments of exhilaration and deep, deep peace which are foretastes of the day when we will be with God forever.

But there is one last thing to say on this All Saints' Sunday. In heaven we will not only be with God; we will be with the ones we love. Your parents, your spouse, your children, your relatives, and friends – in heaven you will see them again and be with them forever. No more tears. No more sorrow. Just one great fellowship of love united in the presence of God.

When you get home, sit down and write out a list of all the people you love. Carry that list with you wherever you go in the future and add to it as your circle of affection grows.

When you die, take that list with you into the next life. When you get to the gates of heaven, St. Peter will stop you and say, "Look, you can't bring anything with you from the other life. Let me have that piece of paper."

And you will probably say, "Oh, it's not anything. It's just a list of people whom I have loved and who have loved me across the years."

And St. Peter will say, "Can I look at it?"

You will hand the list over to St. Peter who will take the list and begin to read it: Joseph, Carol, Marie, Nick, Douglas, Bev, Jane ..."

Then a great smile will break across the face of St. Peter, and he will say, “When I was walking over to work this afternoon, I saw these very people. They were making a poster. It had your name on it, and it said, *Welcome Home!*”

This is our hope, dear people, because the love that created us in the beginning is larger than life and stronger than death.

So what happens when we die? We will be with God and our loved ones forever. The love we have experienced in this life, in heaven there will be no end to it. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi  
November 2, 2025  
Text – Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31  
All Saints Sunday, C  
Advent Church, Sun City West, AZ