

“What Will It Be Like?”

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

“What will it be like when the Cubs win the World Series?” Every Cub fan has pondered this question. Year after year, generation after generation, Cub fans have watched other teams lift the championship trophy and, year after year, generation after generation, these poor souls dared to dream about this seemingly impossible scenario for themselves. Well, the impossible has happened, and this week took on a surreal, if not apocalyptic feeling, as the world awoke on Thursday to the news that the Chicago Cubs are World Series champions.

It was also a big week at Emmanuel as we opened the doors to our restored sanctuary, and, while it may not have been on the level of the Cubs winning the World Series, for a long time we’ve also been waiting and wondering: What will it be like? What will it be like when the cracks in the ceiling are gone? What will it be like when the plaster above the altar is repaired? Or when the sound is clearer...or the lighting is better...or the paint is brighter? The truth is it’s a difficult thing for us to understand a future reality when we’ve never experienced it before, and it’s natural for us to ask: “What will it be like?”

Well today, God’s Word turns our attention to a future reality. And as we celebrate All Saints’ Day and consider the issue of our eternal future reality, the question: “*What will it be like?*” takes on a far deeper meaning than the fortunes of a baseball team or the appearance of a restored sanctuary. Today’s question is an ultimate question. In fact, for us, there is no more important question. What comes next? What will happen when I die? What will it be like? *What will I be like?*

This is a question that most of us manage to avoid in daily conversation, but it’s something we’ve all thought about. In fact, it’s probably a question that has, at some point, kept us up at night, and yet the answer to this question is something even Christians struggle to express. We use vague sentimental language and Biblical phrases, and we talk in general terms about “heaven,” but when it comes to the question of what we will be like, we hesitate. We draw back and grow quiet and politely wait for the next topic to come up. But today, we need to recognize that this silence about our eternal future isn’t helpful, and it’s certainly not what God desires.

Throughout Scripture, God calls us to think and speak and pray and sing precisely about *what we will be*. Peter said, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote, “I do not want you to be ignorant brothers about those who have fallen asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus said, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2-3). The fact is Scripture is filled with information about *what we will be* and the language of heaven is one of the most prominent features of God’s Word. And yet we don’t always live by the light of heaven.

Paul said, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ (then) we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:19). And what we need to hear and consider today is the truth that *this life is not the goal*...and yet, that’s exactly how we so often live! We spend our time and money investing in temporary pleasures, we obsess about our physical health or our retirement funds, and we go through life with our eyes to the ground, distracted by the immediate needs in front of us, consumed with the urgent details of the present, and we rarely recognize the eternal context in which God has placed us. Yet the ultimate question, “*What will it be like?*” never really goes away.

One of the reasons we don’t like to think about this future-focused, eternal question is because the answer has profound implications for the way we live today. In a sermon entitled, “The Weight of Glory” C.S. Lewis wrote, “All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to (heaven or to hell)...It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities...that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people.” And then, Lewis writes, “You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

These chilling words remind us that everything we do in this life has eternal implications. The picture of our lives is painted on the canvas of a future reality and each day we are called to bear this “weight of glory.” And when you honestly think about your life in these terms, it completely destroys the nice and tidy, private and insulated world we’ve all created. It means that everyone you know is on a journey to eternity; that everyone you see is going either to heaven or to hell. The children that “trick or treated” on Monday in your neighborhood, they are on that journey; the people who filled the stadium in Cleveland on Wednesday night, they are on that journey; the refugees streaming into Europe with each passing day, and every voter who goes to the polls on Tuesday, and even the politicians whose names fill the ballot...they are all on that journey. The people you work with each day are on that journey. The neighbor you passed on your way to church today is on that journey. The person sitting next to you right now is on that journey.

As Lewis said, you and I have never met a mere mortal, and that can be a terrifying thought because, the truth is, we have all lived our lives as if this world was the endgame. And we have all disregarded or neglected our neighbors; carefully minding our own business and turning our eyes from the lives and needs of others. Not only that, but we have also ignored our own need to repent; we have resigned ourselves to live in broken relationships and we have failed to reconcile with our brother. These sins of omission have eternal implications and they simply cannot be ignored. One of the reasons we often dodge questions about eternity is because our hearts are too much in the present, and a genuine answer to these ultimate questions demands a change. You see, looking to the future requires us to be honest about our lives in the present and because of our sin, that is never easy. So instead, we keep our heads down, we put off reconciliation, we remain in our sin, and we ignore eternity.

But God will not leave us in our sin, and God will not break the promise He made to us in our Baptism, and today in our epistle reading, John reminds us that the short-sighted and self-centered inclination that comes from our sinful nature is *not* our true identity! John writes: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! *And that is what we are!* Dear friends, *now* we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.”

These words of God pull us out of the present and they place our lives into an eternal context. Here, God tells us who we are now, and today, in these words, God also tells us what we will be like! And these words of God are so important for us to hear because when we recognize the eternal journey we are on, and when we see the future that we have been given in Christ, the present struggles of this life are put into their proper place. We can lift our eyes upward. We can repent for our past failings and confess our present sins and we can receive our identity as children of God, forgiven and freed to be like Him!

For a long time, we’ve been waiting and wondering what this restored sanctuary would be like, but the truth is, as beautiful as it may be, this building only exists to point us to the bigger picture of eternity. And that is exactly what God has called us to in Christ. In Christ, we are given the assurance of an eternal future where, John tells us we will be “like Him” and we will be with Him, and it will be better than anything our minds can imagine or our hands can make.

Today as we recognize the faithful departed, we don’t have to wonder where they are. Today, we speak the sure and certain language of heaven and, as we commemorate their passing into glory, we also proclaim in the words of God what we will be as well! Today, we are purified in the promise of an eternity with Christ and with all who have gone before us in faith. And today, this Gospel message not only purifies us...it prepares us to live our present lives as God’s children today, knowing and proclaiming to the world around us exactly what it will be like. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold