

Between Two Worlds

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15210
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org

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"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:32-33).

One of my favorite metaphors these days comes from Google Earth, where you can zoom in and out on maps or satellite images to find any location on the planet. You can start from a fairly wide perspective to get your bearings, then zoom in as close as you want to find street names, or even to see images of particular houses or other buildings. It strikes me that individual people's perspectives on life are like that, and that we all have different default settings for how closely or broadly we tend to be zoomed in. Many people are zoomed in tight most of the time; they're good at details, and follow through on specifics to get a job done. Other people are zoomed out a bit, more focused on the big picture, and less on the details; they tend to see how things hang together, how the parts fit into the whole. Both perspectives are important, which is why effective organizations need detail people and big picture people; and in fact most of us zoom in and out a bit ourselves, depending on the level of detail we need at any particular moment.

Still, I think that most people, most of the time, live at a relatively zoomed-in level. We tend to focus on whatever is in front of us – what we need to be doing now, and whatever else needs to be done in the next day or two. We concentrate on the people and things closest to us, and tend not to think very much about what lies beyond our immediate interests.

Our Christian faith, though, has the effect of zooming us out a bit, to consider how the details of everyday life fit into the larger scheme of things. Christianity invites us to zoom, not only all the way out on Google Earth to think about the whole world as God's creation, but even beyond that, to something like Google Heaven & Earth, to consider how what we do in this life relates to the kingdom of heaven.

One of the hard privileges of ministry is that ministers sometimes get to be with people when they die. That's hard for all the reasons that death is always

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hard: the apparent finality of it, our helplessness in the face of it, the grief over losing a loved one, the hole that's left in our lives where a person used to be. But hard as it is to witness death, it can also be a privilege. Every person is a marvelous creation, and every life on earth is a story God has chosen to tell, so being present at the end of the story is a kind of solemn honor. Sometimes it can even be a joy.

One reason it can be a joy is that sometimes we catch a glimpse of what it's like to be in transition between two worlds. Once in a while, as the body's energy ebbs away, a person can be talking to others in the room, while at the same time seeming to see or hear or talk to someone in an altogether different place. "It's so beautiful!" people say sometimes. Sometimes they experience a kind of light that feels personal and welcoming – the sort of thing a Christian might expect if Jesus really was the light of the world and really did go to prepare a place for us.

Of course, some people also come back from near death experiences. They don't often talk about them publicly, partly because they don't want to be thought strange, but also because there's a kind of intimacy, even a holiness, to the experience, so that it feels profane to share it too lightly.

Now the overwhelming majority of us don't have those experiences, but it's still true that people of faith live between two worlds. Like everyone else, we're full of the things that can be seen around us. But unlike some people, we believe with St. Paul that the things that can be seen are temporary, while the things that cannot be seen are eternal. We are amphibians, as C. S. Lewis said, living partly in the world of nature and partly in the world of the spirit.

Christians should not take this world lightly. There is a strain of Christianity that disparages the world, claiming that our faith is all about getting to heaven so we shouldn't care too much about this planet. I think that's a mistake. On the contrary, the image of the Garden of Eden suggests that human beings are stewards of creation: we're here to tend and care for the earth on behalf of the Creator. We don't reject the physical world; it's just that we believe there's more to reality than meets the eye. The beauty of creation points to an even greater beauty behind creation. Whatever is true and good and beautiful here reflects the ultimate truth and goodness and beauty of God.

The problem is that many people live as though "what you see is what you get" – as though looking good and getting what we want from the people and things

around us is the whole point of life. Paul calls that being “dead.” He means, if we’re driven entirely by the desires of our natural, physical selves, we’ll be mostly self-serving, missing the mark, falling far below what we were meant to be. “Missing the mark” is the literal meaning of the Greek word for sin. So Paul tells the Ephesians, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world....”

This world is a struggle for survival. The world rewards whoever has competitive advantage, whoever has the skills and health and education and contacts and resources to get ahead. It prompts us to identify friends and foes, to define ourselves over and against other people. This world urges us to see that the people we care about get what they want, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. The world offers all sorts of pleasures, so that it’s tempting to go after them without thinking about the boundaries that surround our pleasures. The world can be captivating, and many people are completely captive to it.

But the Bible says we were meant for more. We were made in the image of God. That means we were made to be intelligent and creative and imaginative, to work and produce and enjoy the fruits of our labors; but also to love the God who made us, and love our neighbors in such a way that what we want for ourselves, everyone else has an opportunity to have as well. In heaven, which is the world where God’s will is done, that’s the way people live. And we were made for that world too – the world in which God’s will is done, not out of some grim sense of obligation, but because the souls in that world actually want what God wants. They enjoy loving God and one another, and their love makes the other pleasures all the more enjoyable.

We were made for both worlds, but as long as we live here and now, we live between two worlds. We have a dual citizenship, which is why all our earthly allegiances to nation or race or class or party are qualified by our ultimate allegiance to God, who insists that love transcends every human boundary.

We were made for both worlds, but insofar as we are captive to this world, and to our self-centered impulses, we are also captive to sin. Sin is what keeps us from being fit for heaven. It’s the thing in us that needs to be not only forgiven but washed away. The gospel says that can happen, but only by the grace of God. None of us can do it by ourselves. We’re too captive to this world, to our own desires. But what we cannot do by ourselves, God can do for us. “By grace you have been saved through faith,” Paul says.

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How exactly that works, no one knows but God. Apparently it's a very costly thing. It requires Christ to die upon a cross. Some cosmic battle is going on that we barely understand. Some metaphysical mystery plays out in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and we participate in it by trusting Christ for our salvation. We appropriate the grace of God, make it our own, by having faith in Jesus.

So Jesus says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." The early church father Athanasius said it was fitting that Christ should die upon a cross, for only on a cross does a man die with his arms outstretched. In Rio de Janeiro there is a statue called *Cristo Redentor*, Christ the Redeemer, on a mountain overlooking the city. The statue is 120 feet tall and nearly 100 feet wide. It has the outstretched arms of Christ reaching out to the rich in their condos on Ipanema and Copacabana and to the poor in their *favelas*, living in cardboard boxes on the hillsides above the beaches. When I saw that sight in 1980, long before there was Google Earth, it had the effect of zooming out my perspective and reminding me how we all live between two worlds.

When Christ is lifted up on a cross, he hangs suspended between heaven and earth. The world below nails him there, thinking it can do away with him. But in the very act of crucifying Jesus, the world below points to the world above. Those of us who call ourselves Christians, who carry Christ in our hearts, also live between two worlds. And if we let the grace of Christ dwell in us richly, the world around us ought to zoom out a little too, and see some reflection of that other world in the faith and hope and love that characterize our lives here and now.