

The Good Place

One of my guilty pleasures (in addition to an occasional Frosty from Wendy's) is a television show, on Netflix, called "The Good Place." How many of you have watched it? The premise of the show is that there is indeed a "good place" to which people go after they die. Provided, that is, they have earned enough points by doing good deeds during their life on earth. If not, then yes, there is also a bad place. But for now, let's focus on the good place. Frozen yogurt shops are everywhere, with a huge variety of delicious flavors. People are given houses to live in that include their favorite features and décor. A never-ending variety of activities are available, including, of course, flying. And you can visit anything you want in both space and time just by walking through one of the numerous green doors.

How do you envision heaven? What do you think it will be like?

The final two chapters of our entire Bible give us John of Patmos' vision of the end times, or as some would say, what heaven is like. He talks about a Holy City he calls "the new Jerusalem," which descends directly from God, and in which we find golden streets, gates of pearl, and God's own throne smack dab in the middle. And yes, at long last, we can finally look upon the full face of God.

What do you think? Does your vision of heaven have golden streets and gates of pearl? Is God in its midst? What about Jesus? Are your loved ones all there? How do you feel about frozen yogurt? ☺

I want to read for you what one of the biblical commentators said about John of Patmos' vision of the New Jerusalem. "John knows that human language is incapable of expressing, just as human imagination is incapable of perceiving, the reality of things in the eternal world as they truly are. But rather than being paralyzed by the finitude of human existence, he is set free to portray the End in a variety of this-worldly pictures used metaphorically to allow the character of the eternal world to break through."

I love that! Especially the part about John being "set free." He has been given permission, presumably by God himself, to use his own gift of imagination to describe what he thinks heaven or the "eternal world" will be like. And you know what? We too have been given not just our own gifts of imagination, but permission to use them.

This is precisely what the writers of the television show "The Good Place" have done. They wanted their images to be as broad and inclusive as possible. They portrayed people from all over the world—and by implication, from all the many world religions—as being there. And, they made the decision to not attempt to portray God. At all. We can guess their reasons. It would make sense that they didn't want to offend anybody, or leave anybody out if their conception of God is completely different, including even all the atheists who claim they don't believe in God. It would also make sense if their decision not to portray God was out of principle, out of acknowledging that portraying God was simply beyond their or anyone's imaginative ability.

But that didn't stop them from imagining a bad place, from exploring the idea that maybe not everyone gets into the Good Place, and that maybe one's final destination depends on how one lived their life on earth.

This brings us now to Revelation 21:7-8. These two verses were not part of the passage chosen for today by the lectionary editors. But I decided to add them, albeit in parentheses. Because a fair presentation of John of Patmos' vision of the afterlife has to include verse 7 and 8. John writes: ⁷ *Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.* ⁸ *But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.*"

Ah yes, "the lake that burns with fire and sulfur"; that's the Book of Revelation we know and love! ☺ I honestly don't know by which standards or criteria I would fare worse—the point system in the Good Place or this list in Revelation 21:8. I can be cowardly, and faithless at times. I have not always been completely honest, with others and even with myself. And I confess I am uncomfortably uncertain how many points for good deeds I have acquired. I can only hope I have a positive balance, let alone enough to get in.

Interestingly, in *The Good Place*, during the course of the show it is discovered that the point system has flaws. That despite human's tendency to fall short, they also have demonstrated a capacity to improve, to try harder, to get better over the course of time. And the character in the show called "the Judge," which maybe is the closest the show comes to having an actual God, agrees. A new system is set up, a system that recognizes a trajectory of effort amidst imperfection (or what Christians would call "sin"). This recognition is perhaps a bit like what the Bible calls "grace."

The Book of Revelation, interestingly, doesn't ever talk about grace, or even forgiveness. But it does talk about God, of course. And while I can understand the absence of a supreme deity or God in "*The Good Place*," this is also where the show falls short, at least in my opinion. In this morning's passage from Revelation, and in the book as a whole, John of Patmos indeed makes some daring claims about God. But he also maintains his own humility. If heaven and hell are ultimately beyond our comprehension and depiction, even more so is God. The best the writer can do is have a technically unidentified but loud voice from the throne saying this: "*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.*"

So, whose voice was that? It might have been God. It might have been Jesus. Either way, it is crystal clear that the final authority on heaven and earth belongs to them. Not to John of Patmos. And certainly not to us.

Interestingly, in both the *Good Place* and the Book of Revelation it is never really clear where heaven or the Good Place is in time and space. Do we go up to it? Or does it come down to us? Is it already here? Or are we still waiting to get in?

In the plot line of the television show all initial efforts at depicting or imagining what the Good Place is like end up being flawed in some way. Partly because concepts like eternity are realities that simply cannot be fathomed by our human brains. It's as if, when it comes down to it, what heaven actually is like will be forever beyond us until we finally get there.

Consider this a spoiler alert ☺ The show ends in a beautiful woods, with an archway made out of branches. One by one, when it is their time, the characters walk through the archway, but at the last second the camera turns away. All we finally see are some sparkles of light, rising into the trees and sky above. And at the very end, one of these sparkles returns to

the world of wonderfully flawed humans, and touches one of them, inspiring him to do a good deed in the form of an act of kindness.

I don't know what your image of heaven or the afterlife or "the eternal world" is. But I think I can live—and die—with this one, content that some questions will only be answered once I finally get there.

I encourage you to share with one another your images of what the eternal world might be like. I also encourage you to keep doing good deeds, while remembering that grace or "getting in" is ultimately a gift only God can give.

Amen.