

**Paradise**  
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**Opening Words** – (#422, Genesis 28)

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

**Sermon**

Sometimes we use “paradise” to describe an event in our lives. The travel brochures urge us to “Come vacation in Paradise.” Thinking back on a peaceful time, when the world around us seemed like it was exactly as it should be, we may say, “It was Paradise.” Gazing out on the ocean or across huge vistas from atop a mountain or up at a sky dark enough to see more stars than we ever could have imagined existed, slung across the night like handfuls of diamonds, we think, “This *is* paradise.”

But we don’t mean *Paradise exactly*, do we? The notion of Paradise holds within it an unreachable ideal, an unattainable perfection—unreachable in that we have pushed it out beyond this life altogether; unattainable in that we have located it in a world outside of time itself, eternally perfectly shimmering just beyond the horizon of our mortal lives.

The advertisement--“Come vacation in Paradise,”--is saying, frankly, this is as close as you’re gonna get here in this life, so fork over the money and enjoy yourself...but the gritty reality of travel arrangements and accommodations and *dealing with people*—the fact that the actuality rarely matches the promise of those brochures, only serves to push Paradise a little further away.

The memory of a peaceful time, when our heart seemed to beat in perfect time with the cosmos, may elicit the feeling that *that was Paradise*. But if so, the very fact that it is a memory means that it is Paradise Lost, and there is no clear way to regain it, to trace our way back, to recreate that feeling...

We may continue to have those moments, in touch with the ocean, the mountains, the night sky—in touch with the unfathomable connection of oneself to the All—and we may think, “This is Paradise.” But as writer and teacher J. Krishnamurti points out, when I think, “I am happy,” I have just removed myself from the present experience of being happy and can only experience it as a memory of being happy. Realizing that the happiness has passed to be replaced by the thought, I become anxious about how I can recapture happiness, and *how I can make it last* this time—and such anxiety, of course, only works against the possibility of happiness.

And maybe a similar thing happens with Paradise. These fleeting moments we experience give us some taste of that ideal we call Paradise. We receive glimpses of eternity--as Sara Moores Campbell says in our hymnal—but Paradise itself is said to await us—or the most fortunate among us, according to traditional Christian theology—Paradise awaits us, in its full eternal perfection, on the other side of death. *There*, it is said, your happiness will not disappear. *There*, it is said, your joy will last forever. *There*, it is said, what is broken and painful will be whole and perfect...*forever*.

A difficult thing to wrap our mind around, isn't it? Whereas [Dante](#) could be horrifically vivid about the depths of hell, his writing becomes much more abstract in the realm of paradise. He begins his journey into Paradise with an interesting disclaimer:

*I was in that heaven which receives  
more of His light. He who comes down from there  
can neither know nor tell what he has seen,*

He who comes down from there can neither know nor tell what he has seen...you would expect his volume on Paradise to be a short book then. It isn't. Dante presses on as best he can, describing as much of the holy kingdom as he could store in his mind...but only in light of that introductory warning that all he can say is not enough.

This recognition that one could never fully capture Paradise continued after Dante. When Franz Liszt wrote his [Dante Symphony](#), Richard Wagner convinced him that it would be foolish to even attempt to express the joys of Paradise, so Liszt ended, rather too abruptly some critics said, with Purgatory.

But if tangible descriptions of Paradise elude us, if it seems terribly distant from this messy mortal life we lead, we are at the same time assured in traditional Christian theology that we are meant for Paradise; that it is the goal that we spend this life striving toward; that it is, in effect, our true home, while this earth is but a way station.

The dearly departed has gone *home* to be with the Lord. There's a better *home* a'waiting in the sky, Lord, in the sky. That sweet chariot is coming for to carry me *home*. When His chosen ones shall gather to *their home* beyond the skies, and the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

Here we are on earth...but heaven is our home. Isn't that what many Christians believe?

Yes, says Anglican Bishop and Bible scholar, N.T. Wright, and that is precisely where many Christians have it wrong. [He explains in an interview](#):

*If you say, "This world is not my home. I'm just a-passin' through," then what you're saying is, "What's the fuss of trying to do anything about this world?" And you're saying, "There's no point in trying to make it a better place." And that's not what Christianity teaches...*

*Most Western Christians have grown up with the idea that the name of game is simply to go to heaven when you die. What I routinely say to people is that heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world.*

Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world. To Wright, that is not simply a cute phrase...it is sound theology. And Wright, I might add, is not considered a liberal theologian; he is firmly Bible-based. And a good share of accepted Christian notions about heaven, he says, have no Biblical basis.

The hope of Christianity, says Wright, is not heaven; it is a transformed earth. The Second Coming of Christ, says Wright, does not mean that Jesus is simply stopping off on earth to pick us up on his way to heaven: it is not the Great Escape so many yearn for, popularized in the mega-selling Left Behind series, it means He is coming back to Earth...to stay this time. The hope of Christianity, says Wright, is not life after death (although he believes in that); the hope lies in the *life after* life after death on Earth, as

the earth itself is transformed in accordance with the will of God. Life after death, what many Christians might call *heaven*, can be seen in Wright's framework, as only a way station as we await the Second Coming; Heaven, that heaven, is temporary; Earth is—and will be—our eternal home.

Now all of this theology may be foreign to the way you look at things; or it may be vaguely familiar; or it may correspond to your own beliefs. As a rule, we don't spend much time here speculating on an afterlife. If I can risk generalizing about Unitarian Universalists, whatever our sources of spiritual and ethical inspiration—Christian, Humanist, Buddhist, Wiccan—as Unitarian Universalists we tend to focus mainly on this life, this world. Like Henry David Thoreau, when asked on his deathbed to describe anything he could see of the next life, we say, "One world at a time." My interest in exploring ideas of Paradise--and Hell and Purgatory in previous sermons--is precisely to examine the ramifications of what we believe and what is popularly believed in our culture on our actions in this life.

I, like Wright, am frightened by an idea, given religious sanction, that earth is a temporary stop and thus not worthy of our work and concern. And what I find exciting about [Wright's particular take on Christian theology](#) is that it places a renewed focus on what happens in this life. Because Earth will be, according to Wright, our home in Paradise, he also affirms that nothing we do here, in this life, will be lost. Indeed, he says, it is the responsibility of the Christian to recognize the kingdom of God that is just waiting to break forth and to work tirelessly toward justice and equity and compassion and environmental responsibility and the will of a just and loving God being done on earth as it is in heaven. When Jesus talked about God's kingdom, says Wright, he wasn't talking about escape from this world into another. "Heaven, in the Bible," says Wright, "is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life."

When Rita Nakashima Brock, Christian minister and Founding Co-Director of Faith Voices for the Common Good, and Rebecca Ann Parker, minister in dual fellowship with the United Methodist Church and the Unitarian Universalist Association and President and Professor of Theology at Starr King School for the ministry—when these two set out to find early Christian images of the crucifixion, they ran [straight into Paradise](#). There weren't many images of the crucifixion, but there was an abundance of images of Paradise. This—I love this—intrigued and disconcerted them. They were dismayed to think that early Christians were so obviously obsessed with the afterlife. But they soon came to similar conclusions as Wright about the function of Paradise in Christian theology:

*To our surprise and delight, we discovered that early Christian paradise was something other than "heaven" or the afterlife. Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God.*

So while I started out this sermon ready—even excited—to travel along with Dante into transcendent ethereal realms of heaven, I was quickly detoured and ended up right here on good old planet Earth. This is *paradise*?? Really?

It reminds me that, when people heard that I was working on a sermon about hell, quite a few comments were made on the order of: "I believe that people create their own hell." You've heard that, right? People create their own hell. I think there's a lot of truth to that.

But I haven't heard the same about Paradise. "People create their own Paradise." Not quite so simple, is it? Hell, I can create, yes...no problem. I know how to make life miserable. But Paradise...that's a

considerably taller order. So when we read about Paradise as “this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God”; when we read about Heaven as “the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life,” what can we take away from such statements?

Let me suggest that all attempts to *create* paradise are probably doomed to failure. The imposition of our own version of paradise onto the world we live in is bound to be frustrated. As the world refuses to conform to our image of Paradise, it will only increase our cynicism; ignite our apathy (if apathy can be ignited); heighten our frustration with other people.

But you’ll notice that neither Wright nor Parker and Brock say anything about *creating* paradise. They are suggesting that Paradise exists right alongside the world that we live in, and that our work is to uncover it, to celebrate it, to find it where it is hidden...What if we, like Jacob in the Opening Words, woke up to find that *this is paradise*? How would our lives change? How would we be with one another? How would we treat the earth and its creatures?

Surely the Lord is in this place—this is Paradise--and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

What if the whole earth was holy ground? What if your front door was the gate of heaven? What if the spirit of life and love was recognized, acknowledged, celebrated in its presence throughout our lives?

Parker and Brock write this:

*We reenter this world as sacred space when we love life fiercely and, in the name of love, protect the goodness of earth’s intricate web of life in all its manifold forms. We feast in paradise when we open our hearts to lamentation, to amplitudes of grief for all that has been lost and cannot be repaired... We give thanks for gifts of love that have been ours all along, an ever-widening circle of beauty... We enter fully—heart, mind, soul and strength—into savoring and saving paradise.*

Where is our paradise? Where is your paradise? Is it an escape hatch to another world, another life? Or is it a new entrance into this world, transformed by a vision of what is possible, the potential sewn into the very fabric of this mysterious existence we share?

Where is our paradise? In aspiration’s sight, wherein we hope to see arise ten thousand years of right.