

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 26, 2016
Sermon Title: Almost Heaven: Our Appalachia
Commissioning Sunday
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Revelation 21:1-4 and Revelation 22:1-2

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

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.'

Revelation 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

I was 24 years old. I had Just graduated from seminary. I was finally a real Church pastor. I was the associate pastor of a large Church in Haverhill, Massachusetts. I had been there for two weeks when the very respected, very distinguished older minister called me into his office . . . and fired me.

The day before, I had preached a sermon on "Building the Kingdom of God," the idea of making our world a bit more like heaven. Using all sorts of construction imagery, I talked about digging a foundation, making it solid, cutting the wood right, pounding the nails straight, having everything plumb and fit, building a house that would last. And I likened all that to "building the Kingdom of God," to creating some heaven right here on earth. So why did I get fired for *that*?

Well, that older minister, my boss, didn't believe that humans could contribute anything to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is God's Kingdom, he told me, it's his world, his rules, his way; we humans can neither add to it nor subtract from it. It is the height of arrogance to think that we mere humans can "*build* the Kingdom of God." The Kingdom of God, he said, is heaven, and heaven is up to God, not us. If we believe in Jesus, we'll get there. If we *don't* believe in Jesus, we won't get there. And in any event, this world is a waste of time.

I begged to differ, *and* I refused to be fired! My point was this world is what we've got, this is the here and now. God created it, handed it over to us, and our job is to build on it. Remember the Lord's Prayer we just said? In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." "Thy Kingdom come on *EARTH*, *ON* earth, right here, just as it is in heaven."

Whatever it is we imagine heaven to be, we are to be building a facsimile, a replica, a model of it right here. We imagine heaven to be a place of "no more tears," the Bible says. All the things that give us tears are gone: death, fear, injustice, anger, disaster, meanness, war, violence, bullying, hurt. All gone. No more tears. Jesus says, if "that's the Kingdom to come, why not, 'thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'?"

The Bible makes it clear that heaven is wonderful, spectacular, almost defies description! And the Bible makes it equally clear that we are supposed to be doing our best to build a little slice of heaven right down here. Long before I came to Greenfield Hill Church, I was deeply involved with Habitat For Humanity all around the world. Habitat was very much like ASP, helping poor people have a decent place to live, with most of the construction done by volunteers. So I went to Africa, Latin America, India, and across America, building houses.

One of my favorite projects was high up in the mountains in Peru. We were building 100 or so houses, and the people named the project "Ciudad de Esperanza," "City of Hope." That was my most favorite name until a new

project applied from West Virginia, the perfectly named, "Almost Heaven," West Virginia. Most of us know it from the John Denver song, "Country Roads."

*Almost heaven, West Virginia,
Blue ridge mountain, Shenandoah river,
Life is old there, older than the trees,
Younger than the mountains, growing like a breeze*

*Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong,
West Virginia,
Mountain mama, take me home
Country roads*

But I knew it from a group of people who wanted to live up to the name, to be almost heaven, to build enough of the "Kingdom of God," to be almost heaven; to use their hands, their backs, their hammers and shovels and saws, their wood and cement, their time, their youth, their experience, *and* yes, their faith, their love of God, their Christlike attitude, to help some families have an almost taste of heaven.

You see the painting here? A brilliant, exciting painting by our own Wendy Everett Cooke. She calls it "Quest." It's the journey to heaven; heaven is up ahead, on the horizon, just around the corner. You're on the journey; it can seem dangerous, perilous; you're on a boat in the ocean, there are rocks and shoals and winds, there are storms, but it's also beautiful, also thrilling, almost heaven.

Wendy told me straight out, "It's an allegory about going to heaven, based on the Bible verse, "For now you see through a glass darkly, but one day you will see clearly, face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Today we dedicate, consecrate, send off 235 people from our Church family — hear that number again, *235 people!* They are off to "build the Kingdom of God." Unlike the minister who tried to fire me, our people actually believe they have the right, they have the ability, they have the responsibility to "build the Kingdom of God," to move people closer to Almost Heaven, to help God's "Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven." That is their Quest!