

## A REASONABLE AND HOLY HOPE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
All Saints' Sunday  
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*Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (from Revelation 7)*

We the people of the United States have much on our minds as we look toward Tuesday's presidential election. Personally, I'm still trying to comprehend the apparently new and bizarre reality we seem to have entered. Yes, we live in a world where the Chicago Cubs are the champions of baseball. Can it be true? Well, unless you have imposed on yourself a personal news blackout, you know that the longsuffering Cubs and their fans have been waiting 108 years for the new day that finally dawned in the wee hours of last Thursday morning. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Cubs fans – a great multitude that that no one could count – went to their graves with only rare and fleeting glimpses of the sun's warming rays. They held onto a reasonable and holy hope of one day winning the World Series. But for them it was year after futile year of the same old thing: losing.

One of those longsuffering fans was a man named Wayne Williams of Indiana. Before he was 18-years old, Williams was drafted to serve in the navy during World War Two. He was sent to boot camp at Great Lakes, near Chicago. The Wrigley family, who owned the Cubs at the time, would occasionally bring the soldiers-in-training into the city to see a game. It was a gesture that Williams never forgot, and from then on he became a lifelong fan. After the war came marriage and children, in particular, a son whom he named Wayne Jr. Over the years Wayne Jr. also adopted the Cubs, so father and son became passionate fans. They had an agreement that when – not if, but when – the Cubs played in the World Series, the two of them would listen to the games together. It was a pact between them.

Sadly, Wayne Sr. died young: only 53-years old in 1980. But what of the pact with his son? Wayne Jr. didn't forget it, and he wasn't going to let death prevent him from fulfilling his end of the bargain. So last Wednesday Wayne Jr. drove all day from his home in North Carolina to his father's grave in Indiana. He set up a folding chair by the headstone, and there he listened to the entire 10-inning game. When the Cubs finally won, he placed the "W" flag next to the marker and said, "We did it."<sup>1</sup>

Today is All Saints' Sunday, a day on the church calendar when we celebrate a wonderful and sacred mystery we call the Communion of Saints. What we believe about the Communion of Saints is that when you belong to Jesus, you are marked as his own forever. As we're told in the Scriptures, death cannot separate you from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. Love is strong as death. Love never ends. Thus, the church is a fellowship that has members on both sides of eternity. We who dwell in time and space are known as the church militant. Those who have died trusting and hoping in Jesus are the church triumphant. "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee for all are thine," is how today's opening hymn expresses the notion. They are in heaven. Those whose names we list in the bulletin today, and for whom we light candles, they are in heaven.

Where is heaven? To address such a question we would need new definitions for the words "where" and "is." Heaven is where God is – outside the parameters of time and space. Nevertheless, the veil between heaven and earth can be thin. Those whom we love and have lost to death are not gone from us forever. Life is changed, not ended. We pray for them, they pray

for us. Wayne Williams, Jr. was onto something last week when he honored the pact he had made with his father. The love they shared has not died. Wayne, Jr. continues to experience the presence of his father. On a larger, more vivid scale, God granted St. John the Divine a vision of heaven. John looked and saw a great multitude that no one could count, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God, and praising God's name ever more.

For John, the veil between heaven and earth was thin to transparent. He looked and wondered who these inhabitants of heaven were. Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? The answer he received: "*These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*" It sounds to me like heaven is full of Cubs fans who have come out of their 108-year long ordeal. If you find the notion irreverent or outlandish, today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew might even lend more support. Those who are blessed, those in heaven or on their way to it are not those whom the world would typically call champions year after year. They are the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, and the persecuted among others. Good news for Cubs fans! Good news for all of us who inevitably will struggle to stay faithful to Jesus through the great ordeals.

When we speak of eternal life, you and I both know that not everyone subscribes to our point of view. Some would say that our definitions of the words "where" and "is" are perfectly sufficient. Only the natural world of time and space exists. Any notion of a soul, or spirit, or a mind independent of its biological host is only that: a notion. In case you were wondering, God and heaven are also filed in the folder of things that exist only as notions. They are ideas produced by our brains, nothing more. How can this be? Well, various neuroscientists and theoretical physicists remind us that all natural things, including human bodies and brains, are composed of particles. These particles interact with each other according to the laws of nature, but with such infinite complexity that they produce what the skeptics claim is only an illusion: that we have minds and souls apart from our bodies. What is more, even if we did have immaterial minds and souls, they ask: how could that which is immaterial affect or move the particles that compose us? It could not. What it all means, they conclude, is that death is the end. The mind cannot survive the death of the body. When we die, that's it. John's vision existed in his head. Likewise, Wayne Williams honoring the pact with his father was a nice bit of sentimentality. So the hope for heaven might be holy, but it isn't reasonable.

Others choose not to believe in heaven simply because they find the notion not only unreasonable, but absurd and unappealing. I recently read a short piece of fiction about a man who dies and wakes up in heaven. Everything is wonderful. He plays golf, eats gourmet meals, and cavorts with beautiful people for what seems to be an eternity. The problem is, after a while he gets bored, so bored that he wants out. He asks an angel what to do, and the angel tells him that he can simply choose to be done with it and die. "Do people in heaven choose to die," asks the man? The angel replies, "Sooner or later they all choose to die."<sup>2</sup>

Actually, we can sympathize with the author of the story if heaven is nothing but a bigger, better, longer version of life on earth. More of the same, even if it's good, eventually gets old. I suppose even the Cubs would eventually tire of winning if the result were inevitable for all eternity. But when we look closely at what Christians really mean by heaven, you'll see that it has little to do with what we might project onto it, regardless of how noble, selfish, or silly our imaginings may seem. Frankly, we can't imagine it. St. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 2:9): *What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived ... God has prepared for those who love him.* More of the same doesn't describe it.

It seems to me that for us to imagine heaven from earth is like an unborn baby trying to imagine what life is like on the other side of the womb. If a baby could imagine anything at all, its warm and snug little perspective is all it would know. All the joys, challenges, loves, and losses of life on the other side would be inconceivable. The baby hears some things: muffled voices,

perhaps music. Is anything or anyone out there? Does “out there” even exist? Meanwhile, the same old routine of swimming around in amniotic fluid isn’t working anymore. Things are getting a bit cramped, and eventually it’s time to go. It’s time to die. Or is it time to be born? Perhaps birth itself is an intimation that life is changed, not ended, *and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens* (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 382). Indeed, St. Paul would go on: *What God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit.*

Thus, on All Saints’ Sunday we proclaim that we have a reasonable and holy hope of eternal life with those we love. What saves this day from being merely a sentimental journey, dripping with nostalgia, is Easter. The wonderful and sacred mystery we call the Communion of Saints traces all of its meaning back to the resurrection of Jesus. I read in *The New York Times* on Friday that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, thought to be built over the very tomb of Jesus, is undergoing extensive repairs. The work required that the tomb itself be opened. Good news: it was empty! It has been since the first Easter Day. The most plausible explanation of the Resurrection is that Spirit of God got those particles in Jesus’ dead body moving again. When we put our faith in the risen Jesus, we can reasonably and confidently believe in eternal life with our beloved sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, friends, and even foes. That this One sent from God did not stay dead, but was alive again three days after his crucifixion, this opens our eyes for a glimpse of God’s unimaginable everlasting life. There we see that the saints of God are waiting for us. They are praying for us.

Earlier this fall a college professor contacted Grace Church because she was researching the life of Isabella Stewart Gardner, the founder of the famous museum in Boston that bears her name. Isabella had grown up at Grace Church when this building was new, and the researcher was hoping we might have information in our archives that could fill in some gaps. Isabella’s parents were David and Adelia. Isabella was their oldest, then came three more children: a girl and two boys. Sadly, of the four children, only Isabella would outlive the parents. The girl died just days shy of 12-years old. The two sons died in their twenties. Did David and Adelia Stewart sink into despair? We can only imagine the depth of their grief, but what they did was to create a lasting statement of their reasonable and holy hope of eternal life with the children they loved and lost. The renowned stained glass artist Henry Holiday designed for them a window that depicts the raising of Lazarus described in the Gospel of John, and the raising of Jairus’ 12-year old daughter in the Gospel of Mark. The window shines for us still in the south aisle of the nave, and my guess is that the depiction of Jairus’ 12-year old daughter bears a striking resemblance to the daughter of David and Adelia Stewart.

As I gazed at the window recently, I thought three things. The first thing I thought was, “Wow, this window really needs restoration! It’s time for a capital campaign.” My second thought was that I could scarcely imagine the lifetime of loss and heartache that gave rise to the creation of the window. But thirdly, I marveled at what must have been the faith of these two parents who struggled through their great ordeal.

Today we give thanks for them and a great multitude like them, who rejoice with us but upon another shore and in a greater light. Today we believe and trust that *they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

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<sup>1</sup> The story is told in numerous online articles that seem to originate with the television station WTHR, Indianapolis.

<sup>2</sup> The story originates with Julian Barnes and is told in [The Big Picture](#), by Sean Carroll, p. 420.