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## Sermon of February 26, 2006 Dr. Jim Standiford, Senior Pastor

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### “RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES: 8. FLOWING WATERS, ABUNDANT FRUIT”

Revelation 22:1-5  
John 12:24-26

*Eternal God, shine your light into our lives, so that we might be disciples of your Son, Jesus Christ, all of our lives. Amen.*

*(Jim Standiford)* Today is the last of our sermon series, “Ripped From the Headlines.” Each week we have taken a major Christian doctrine and looked at it in light of a story from the current news. Our doctrine today is paradise. Other biblical terms are heaven, or life after death, or eternal life, or the Kingdom of God.

There are many terms to describe what happens at the culmination of life. We all have our own images or visions about the destination of life. Those of you who were at the New Life Counseling Center’s auction a couple of weeks ago got a glimpse of a vision of paradise. One of the items for auction was a timeshare in Hawaii. Hawaii is many people’s literal vision of paradise. Molly Vetter was one of the active bidders for this timeshare. For her, this item represents the paradise of her husband Matt returned from war and their vacationing together, and her dream of that time until his return from combat. Others sensed this too and were cheering her on. Molly’s opposing bidder was Kevin Churchill, who was not on-site but was bidding over his cell phone with Todd Cecil placing his bids. As soon as Kevin realized his competition was Molly, he stopped then and there. He no doubt had his own vision of how to use the timeshare, but he gave up his for Molly. Friends, in that moment, we have a glimpse of paradise, of the Kingdom of God.

Pat Brown of 7/39 News brings our news story today. Listen to hear a bit of heaven in her story.

*(Pat Brown)* In a world where our news is most often filled with reminders of our brokenness – violence, greed, fear and destruction – the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Revelation seem far-off. Every now-and-then, though, we are reminded of someone who dared to see these visions in our own world, right in the midst of its brokenness.

Last Thursday, our downtown Public Library hosted a ceremonial book launch for a book entitled, “Dear Miss Breed,” by Joanne Oppenheim. The *Union-Tribune* reported the story of this remarkable

city librarian in San Diego last Sunday.

When President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order for the evacuation and internment of some 120,000 U. S. residents of Japanese descent, Clara Breed was “quietly outraged.” Having seen many local children who would be affected by this order, her outrage was deepened because she had seen how respectful and loyal many of these children were. She believed “they were no more threat than she was,” according to the *Union-Tribune*.

Her belief was not a popular one in a time in our culture marked much more clearly by division; anger and fear sparked by the bombing of Pearl Harbor was fresh in the minds of Americans. Nonetheless, she was convinced that she had to do something.

Miss Breed gave out postcards at the library, and then at the train station on evacuation day – making sure the children who were leaving had her address. She wanted to keep up with how they were doing. And she promised to send books.

Throughout the time that Japanese Americans were interned in camps, Miss Breed corresponded with dozens of children, sending them little things they asked for when she could, and asking to hear their stories. She sent books, which gave access to a world beyond the barbed-wire enclosures where these children were forced to live. Her letters, which are now housed at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, included as many as 256 letters from one of her more frequent correspondents.

Miss Breed also advocated for those who were interned. She wrote articles, trying to draw attention to the condition of these children. She wrote to government officials. She advocated for college-age students to be able to continue their educations.

In 1991, a group of 700 former inmates at Poston, a “relocation center” in Arizona, got together for a reunion. Clara Breed was their guest of honor, and they gave her a standing ovation.

Now, Joanne Oppenheim’s book remembers her story, and reminds us of the courage of one who chose to transcend fear and remind us of our common ideals. When Clara Breed died in 1988, she left the legacy of a woman who lived the way she wanted the world to be.

*(Jim Standiford)* Notice in Molly’s experience and in the story of Miss Breed the focus is on relationships. Relationships are at the heart of the biblical images of paradise or heaven or what ever we call it. Let us look at several.

Isaiah in Chapter 65 speaks to the people held in POW camps in exile in Babylon. He says that when they are finally freed and allowed to return home it will be as though God will create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. Poetically but clearly he speaks of new relationships in this new creation:

- Suffering will be abolished.
- There will be an end to infant mortality that is so common among the poor.
- The elderly will live out their lives in good health.
- People will have decent housing they can call their own.
- Everyone will have a job that pays a fair wage.
- Mothers will not worry when their children are born that they will be destroyed by drugs or blown away in gang warfare.
- The creative ecological balance of Eden will be restored and environmental destruction will come to an end. (Isaiah 65:17-25)

In Zechariah, another prophet of the Exile, we read that neighborhoods will be safe so that old people will be able to come out of their houses in the evenings, sit on their front steps, lean on their canes, and watch children playing in the

streets. (Zechariah 8:4-5)

The vision of Revelation in the New Testament, is written to a people experiencing terrible persecution. Here the home of God is among the people, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. (Revelation 21:3-5)

In the passage we heard read today from Revelation we have a description of the city of God in the new creation. This is no typical urban landscape. The river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God and the tree of life produces twelve different kinds of fruit, one each month (This is obviously where Harry and David got their idea for their Fruit of the Month Club). The leaves of the tree heal the nations. People will have direct relationships with God and see God face to face, and God will be so present there will be no need for any other form of light. This picture is all about the life-giving suffusing presence of God enveloping the community. It's all about relationships.

John, the gospel writer, has us see something else in his few verses we heard earlier. His perspective is also relational. He says a grain, if it does not fall into the ground and dies, remains by itself. This is a very strong statement for the need for transformation. Unless we die, change, give up our fierce, independent individualism, we can't live. We will remain isolated and alone and will come to nothing. The seed that fights this change will never be anything more than a seed. It will not become a flower, a fruit, a vegetable, a vine, or a tree. It will have great potential, but its potential will die in its seediness.

How many people do you know have had great potential but wouldn't allow themselves to change, so they died unfruitful? What part of your life is resisting dying so that new life will never be possible there?

My mentor and friend, The Reverend Don Locher, died this past week. I don't know of anyone who loved the church or ministry as much as he. He gave his all, all his life. Several years ago, like an old car, certain parts began to function less and less, I watched him go through several amazing transformations. As part of him would die, he would find new ways to do essential tasks. Also, he discovered new talents and new energy and new opportunities to continue to minister, serve the church, and love people. When he and I worked together years ago, he once told a class that we resist death with everything we have, good diet, exercise, good medical care, and disciplined living, until a certain point. He said, confessionally, "I hope we all can recognize when that time comes. Then we move to the next step." When Don's daughter called me this week and told me of her dad's death, she related how he had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. From his hospital bed he declined further medical help, he called the family together, he told them he was ready to die, that he loved them each one, and said his good-byes. Then he went to sleep. He died peacefully in his sleep. The seed that fights its death will never be anything more than a seed. The imagery Jesus uses here indicates that when we change, even the ultimate change of death, there is an abundant fruitfulness ahead.

Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me." If we follow Jesus in giving life to others our efforts will be fruitful. Further, Jesus says we will be with him.

The gospel writer John speaks repeatedly about eternal life, but he is clear he is not just talking about life after death. He says, "This is eternal life, to know God and Jesus whom God sent." (17:3) Eternal life is relationship, the relationship characterized between God and Christ. It is a relationship such as between a vine and branches, between flowing waters and abundant fruit. It is a face-to-face relationship. It is a relationship where the washing, nurturing, cleansing, refreshing presence of God will create us as new beings so that we give and receive abundantly in our relationships. The noted missionary, E. Stanley Jones, did not use the term "eternal life" rather he spoke of "abundant life." He saw the qualitative relationship between God and Christ as a gracious possibility for us in this life as well as in the life to come. The biblical images we cited earlier all have this abundant relational aspect to them.

For a long time I have preferred the term "Kingdom of God" to "heaven" or "paradise" or "eternal life." Kingdom of God seems to suggest relationships more than the other terms. However, Brian McLaren, writing in the current *Sojourners* magazine, contends that Jesus would not use "Kingdom of God" at all today. He says in our current

thinking to speak of a kingdom is the very opposite of the liberating, barrier-breaking, domination-shattering, reconciling movement Jesus intended us to see. McLaren then offers some possible new terms. Of his offerings I like “the dream of God” the best. It is that which God envisioned for all creation from the very beginning, everything, including God, is in life-giving community. It is something akin to the dream a mother has for her baby, or the artist has for his novel or her symphony.

Harvey Cox in his book, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, contends that Jesus not only taught parables, but that he lived his parables. He lived new ways of having relationships. He lived God’s dream. In our news story today, Miss Breed lived God’s dream for children; that they continue to learn, grow, and know they are loved. She showed her love in the best way she knew, by sending them books. She spoke out for her dream to the authorities. She acted her dream to the children. As Pat said, “She lived the way she wanted the world to be.” If you and I live seeking the well being of everyone we will fulfill God’s dream. It will be heaven on earth. It will be like flowing waters and abundant fruit. It will be like a timeshare in Paradise, but it will be eternal.

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