

**Homily by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
at the Memorial Service for Elsie Hilliard Hillman  
Saturday, September 19, 2015**

Revelation 21: 2-7

*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. Revelation 21:2*

The evening before Elsie died, I had the privilege of spending some time talking and in prayer with her. As you might guess, I did most of the listening. She was strong but struggling. She kept trying to remove her oxygen mask and say one more thing as her husband of seventy years never left her side. Her last words to me were a type of unforgettable, final blessing. "I'm ready to go home, now. I'm ready to go home."

What or with whom is now her home? In popular culture, Heaven is filled with puffy clouds, bad music, and boring people. That's not any type of place deserving of her and has nothing to do with the Christian faith and hope. We don't really know but we can imagine from our own experience what our heavenly home will be like.

The people in biblical times used the best of their imagination to convey a life fully connected to God and one another. Their context was a dry and dusty desert culture with a scarcity of fresh water and arable land always under threat.

From what they experienced and imagined, they developed two, prominent images of paradise. One was a lush and peaceful, walled garden free from suffering, separation, and death – a restored Garden of Eden. The second image was a vision of a vibrant city – the New Jerusalem from today's reading. The holy city represented Heaven coming to Earth – for God to dwell in the midst of mortals with justice, peace, and love. That was Heaven to them.

More than 100 years ago, a priest\* of Calvary Church wrote that, "Our Jerusalem is the city in which we live... Pittsburgh." This great city, this great people is where we will know God and experience a glimpse of Heaven come to Earth. If we can't experience it here, we'll never find it. But it will take hope, hard work, and imagination- qualities Elsie shared in abundance.

A great city is more than buildings made of steel and stone, more than museums and monuments, universities and hospitals, factories, rivers and parks, or even its people. A city is a community of imagination, a society created together. A home away from our eternal home.

Elsie Hillman worked to bring the New Jerusalem to *our* Jerusalem. She helped bring, in a myriad of large and small ways, a little Heaven come to Earth in our city. She could have lived anywhere but chose *this* as her home.

For now, it can seem like a great light has gone out. It can be difficult in loss and death to retain hope- to know that there is more to the future and to life than what we see. The best we can imagine about Heaven is but the faintest shadow of the real thing.

Our responsibility is to make our city, our home, more like the heavenly one as she did in her own way, never perfected but always striving towards it. A city that is more just. More kind. More open. More representative of all of God's children. With more opportunity. More beauty. More like the people we *can* be together. To do so, will take hard work, hope, and imagination. What might this heavenly vision look like for our city and what might it be for you?

A glimpse of Heaven is our city made right for all. Heaven is witnessing the birth of your child. Heaven is being forgiven when you don't deserve it. Heaven is being with God and those whom we love forever. Heaven is seeing your betrothed for the first time walking down the aisle. Heaven is 70 times 70 years of marriage with the one who gets you and still loves you. All are just glimpses of the Glory to come. That is the heavenly home to which Elsie was ready to go and the home for which she worked to make more room for all to live and dream.

What is Heaven to you? The best image for me happened on my first trip to the city. The experience was a metaphor for emerging from one life to the next – for finding home. It was one of those perfect September days when all job interviews should take place in Pittsburgh. We entered the tunnel. Everything is closed in. You can only see what's right in front of you. There is the rhythmic thumping of the road. The monochrome walls. Bad lighting. Stale air. A faint light off in the distance but with promise.

All at once, the whole world opens up. Sky, hills, rivers, towers, bridges, color, people. Energy. Life. Possibility. Every direction you look. You can almost forget how glorious is the city. A glimpse of heaven is emerging through the tunnel on a sunny afternoon when you have been away from home. That is still but a faint shadow. The *real thing* is the life that Elsie now enjoys and is our hope in Christ. Imagine heaven. Imagine home.

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\* George Hodges, Assistant of Calvary Church in Pittsburgh from 1881-1889 and Rector from 1889-1894. He later became Dean of Episcopal Theological School (Seminary) in Cambridge, MA.