

Heaven

June 9, 2019 sermon text by Adam Fajardo

Opening Words

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come, yet again, come, come.

"Heaven"

I

Like many Americans of my generation, I learned theology not so much from church but from pop music. Sure, I was exposed to religion here and there. No parents, not even my own, can keep their children safe forever. And Lord knows my folks tried. Mama *tried*. When I was a kid, Sunday was just Saturday, Part II. Sunday morning meant that the cartoons didn't start until later, after these men in nice suits finally quit begging me to call their toll-free line.

I once asked my mother who those guys were. She looked me in the eye and said, "Adam, Televangelists are criminals they allow on TV to make money." I spent several years of my life believing that was literally true. Once or twice a year, Sunday meant we'd trudge to Dan River Church, gathering place for my grandma's primitive Baptist congregation. Slouched in creaky wooden benches, I'd let the preaching about the perils of hellfire and heaven's eternal reward bounce off my ears. The message didn't sink in. Heaven sounded so boring.

It's a cliché, I know. But eternal life with my family— *my* family—*that's* the reward for a lifetime of forbearance? What would we do in heaven? Wouldn't twanging harps get old? I tried from time to time to muster up the holy feeling I imagined everyone else felt at church. But it didn't take. Turns out it's difficult to fake that sort of thing. So where does an unchurched child like me go to find divine inspiration? Pop music, that's where.

II

You can dismiss pop music as superficial if you like. After all, as a genre, pop exists primarily to get your booty shaking. That's its prime directive. And pop is *good* at it. It's also easy to dismiss pop there is *a lot* of bad pop out there. The worst pop—those overproduced, commercial, autotuned, songs—that were grown in test tubes before being unleashed on the unsuspecting public: those make me vomit in my mouth, just a little. But the best pop songs—the ones that put some thought and artistry into their lyrics, can accomplish much more. A little bit of sugar

makes the medicine go down, and a good dance beat can smuggle an interesting idea past your inner TSA agent and deposit it into your subconscious.

That's what happened to me, and today I want to share with you a piece of the gospel of the Talking Heads.

III

In case you don't know them, the Talking Heads are easily one of the most important bands of the last fifty years. They helped define the sound of new wave in the 1980s. Their song "Heaven," imagines heaven as a nightclub. "Everyone is trying," lead singer and lyricist David Byrne croons, "to get to the bar. The name of the bar, the bar is called heaven." Byrne uses two motifs to describe Heaven in this song.

In the chorus, he sings, "Heaven... Heaven is a place, a place where nothing, nothing ever happens." That's the first. Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens. The second motif is developed in the verses. This time, Byrne describes Heaven as a place where the same things happen over and over and over again. "The band in heaven, they play my favorite song. Play it one more time. Play it all night long." "When this kiss is over, it will start again. It will not be any different. It will be exactly the same."

So these two ideas are what we need to hold in our mind at the same time: Heaven is a place where nothing happens; Heaven is a place where the same things happen over and over again. Byrne's lyrics go a step further, though, and this is the really interesting part. He doesn't merely rest on this paradox.

Listen to these lines from the chorus:

"It's hard to imagine,
that nothing at all,
could be so exciting,
could be this much fun."

That first line, where he says, "it's hard to imagine"—what does that line do? It acknowledges our skepticism. It nods to the listener. It says, "look, I get it. This is a weird idea... "You'll experience the same party, the same song, the same kiss, over and over again. It won't change AND each time, you'll experience it as new. This is weird. I know." I think this simple act of acknowledging the listener's skepticism is *the* crucial moment in this song. Because instead of creating an idea for you, instead of giving an idea to you, saying "it's hard to imagine" invites you to co-create the meaning, to actively, imaginatively participate in joining with Byrne in imaging your version of heaven. Saying "it's hard to imagine" casts Byrne not as a preacher on the pulpit, disseminating the received Word of God, but as a person like you and me, a person who might find it difficult to imagine heaven.

In this way, Byrne is much more effective in speaking to a skeptic like me than the preachers at Dan River Church. I pulled away from their ardent belief in this version of heaven, that version of hell, the Heaven they sought to give me, not to co-create with me. Byrne was not a Unitarian Universalist, as far as I know, but that message has a distinctly UU flavor, doesn't it?

IV

It's hard to imagine—perhaps *very* hard to imagine—a more unlikely philosopher to invoke in a sermon about Heaven than Frederic Nietzsche. After all, Nietzsche declared, “God is dead!” He can't have cared much for Heaven. Few philosophers have expressed more disdain for Judeo-Christian thought than Nietzsche, who dismissed it as mere “slave morality.” Yet there is a major part of his thought that speaks to the thread I've been tugging on here.

Nietzsche believed that meaning, purpose, and truth were human constructs, not ordained by God or metaphysics. Even so, he used a metaphysical idea to explain a key component of his philosophy. That's the idea of eternal return. Eternal return: Many religions throughout history have imagined time as a cycle. Nietzsche, however, is the first non-religious thinker to embrace the idea of eternal return. Here is an excerpt from *The Gay Science*:

“What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence—and in the same way this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and in the same way this moment and I myself. The eternal hour-glass of existence will be turned again and again—and with it, you dust of dust!’ – Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke?”

Instead of Byrne's party, Nietzsche casts the decisive moment of eternal return not as pleasure but as a moment of supreme loneliness. A moment of angst, of existential dread. That's how it begins, at least. Take a moment to consider what Nietzsche is suggesting here: Can you imagine living every moment of your life, in the exact same sequence, from birth to death, not only once, but again and again? How would you react to learning that eternal return is your predicament?

Nietzsche imagines two reactions: One is to despair—“Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke?” But he also posits another, opposite reaction. What, he asks, would your internal state have to be to learn of eternal return and respond to the demon, “You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!”

“Or how well disposed toward yourself and towards life would you have to become to have *no greater desire* than for this ultimate eternal sanction and seal?”

Nietzsche, did not believe in the literal, metaphysical truth of eternal return. He did not believe that we literally are born, live, die, and repeat the cycle in exactly the same order an infinite number of times. Rather, he used the idea of eternal return like a test. A great human spirit, he thought, said *yes* to the world. This does *not* mean abdicating morality. It does *not* mean turning a blind eye to injustice. Far from it. It means embracing, in a radical way, the responsibility of making meaning out of our experiences. And when I say *radical* here, I'm thinking of its etymological meaning, which shares the same origin as the word *root*.

A *radical* embrace of the responsibility of meaning making is one that begins in your roots, that is personal down to the core of your being. It is not amoral, but grounded in a morality derived from human, not divine, origins. The only way to live so well that you could repeat the exact

same life ten thousand times over without regret. Is to fully embrace each moment for what it is.

That's what Nietzsche is getting at when he writes:

"My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing other than what is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it... but to *love* it..." He says we must love the world as it is, to love our experiences. But what could he mean by "love" here? We frequently use "love" superficially, so it's easy to glaze over this word choice. He doesn't mean "love" in the sense of "I love tacos." (Actually, there is nothing superficial about my love for tacos.)

Rather, it is that radical kind of love—that transformative love—that is perhaps most difficult to feel with your family, with your children, with your lovers, for it is a love that doesn't seek to change but to accept the other for who they are, who they truly are, not who we wish them to be. Nietzsche was no Buddhist, but that idea sounds quite Buddhist, doesn't it? To let go of all illusions and cravings, to let go of desiring for *this* to be *that*. *Amor fati*—love of fate. It's hard to imagine, but how great would your love have to be to love not only one imperfect lifetime, but an infinity of them?

V

Let's put these ideas together now. Heaven is a place where nothing happens. Which means Heaven is a place where the same things happen over and over again. And one measure of human greatness is radically accepting things as they are, not as we wish for them to be. And not only tolerating this reality, but *loving* it so completely that it would be an utter joy to live the same life over again.

Is that Heaven?

VI

Byrne's song is about the idea of Heaven as eternal pleasure. You're in a nightclub. The band is playing your favorite song. There is a party. You're kissing your lover. And when it ends, it all starts again. And somehow, you never get tired of it. Hard to imagine, right? Nietzsche's scenario begins with existential dread—a demon cursing you to live the same life over and over again—but transforms that dread into a radical, loving embrace of reality. Both examples begin at extremes: extreme pleasure on one hand, extreme suffering on the other. Perhaps a better test, though, is not the extremes but the mundane.

I'm a dad. I live in the suburbs. There are many days when I feel like I'm caught in the plot of a personal *Groundhog's Day*.

Wake up a little too early (because every night I somehow manage to stay awake too long).

Feed the kid.

Feed myself.

Cheerios taste the same every day.
Kiss my wife.
Drop the kid off at school.
Commute to campus.
Teach classes I've taught before.
Read the same freshman essays I've read before.
Commute home.
Eat the leftovers.
Load the dishwasher.
Read *Goodnight Moon* for the thousandth time.
"Goodnight, bowl of mush!"
Wish the kid "Sweet dreams."
Somehow manage to stay awake too long.
Pass out into my bed.
Rinse, repeat.

I tend to think of all these mundane, routine activities as the things I must endure before getting to the good stuff. But what if I'm wrong? I've been a parent now for three years. There is nothing, I've discovered, like being a parent to make you keenly aware of the power of routine. Everything repeats. My child wants to read the same books over and over again, and he corrects me if I change even a single word.

"No, Dad. *No*," he says. "That's not right."

In the moments when I wake up to my life, I'll admit that I've often felt Nietzsche's sense of dread. Can this be all there is? How am I reading the same book yet again? How am I washing the same dishes yet *again*? Byrne's song and Nietzsche's philosophy are powerful because they speak to our lived experience of routine. And we repeat so many things.

We fight the same fights with our lovers again and again. We make the same mistakes over and over. We learn the same lessons time after time. It's hard to imagine many experiences that are truly unique. Most of life is a repetition of something. Life's endless repetitions can be soul crushing. They can make you feel like a demon has cursed you to endlessly repeat the same commute over and over, to load the dishwasher again and again, and to read *Goodnight Moon*, again, for a merciless toddler who demands nothing short of perfection.

But perhaps, *perhaps*, the key to the kingdom of Heaven is finding a way to *love* these endless repetitions. When this day is over, it will begin again. It will not be any different. It will be exactly the same. Byrne's lyrics describe an attitude, a perception, not epistemological fact. So maybe Heaven is a choice. Maybe the key to Heaven is the act of controlling your perception. You choose to despair at life's endless repetition, or you chose to love it.

Amor fati.

It's hard to imagine that you could make that choice, that it would be so easy, and so impossibly hard, to enter into Heaven.

Benediction

The service is over.

It will begin again.

It will be exactly the same.

You will relive every moment of your life.

Act accordingly.