Reclaiming heaven

by Mark Ralls in the December 14, 2004 issue

When Rudolf Bultmann observed in 1941 that “there is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word,” he was speaking accurately about the spirit of his age. For much of the 20th century, heaven has been treated as the theological equivalent of Timbuktu. With the phrase “from here to Timbuktu,” popular speech reduced an actual city in Mali to a synonym for the impossibly far away, the totally foreign. Something similar has happened to heaven in mainline churches. We no longer speak of heaven as an actual destination, a hope to be realized. Now heaven is a figure of speech, a consoling metaphor to pull out for funeral services. I am not saying that we have stopped believing in heaven. Rather, I am suggesting that like Timbuktu, heaven is treated as if it were a term for something foreign and far away.

As a pastor, I am uncomfortably aware of my own reticence to speak of heaven and how that places me at odds with the founder of my denomination. “I am . . . passing through life as an arrow through the air,” John Wesley once preached. “I am a spirit come from God and returning to God. . . . I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore.” I believe that too, but to be honest, I would be embarrassed to say so from the pulpit. Any serious attempt to describe for my congregation what it means to believe in heaven is about as likely from me as my traveling to Timbuktu. Like a lot of mainline pastors I know, I’m caught between honest belief and embarrassment. The result of this uneasy truce is silence.

Several forces have led to this ambivalence. Most obvious is that mainline clergy have reacted against heaven’s being used for manipulation: the ultimate carrot dangling on the stick of conversion—or worse, used as a crass fund-raising tactic by televangelists. Even when people’s motives are pure, mainline pastors are rightfully uneasy when faithful Christians become preoccupied with the world to come. They scrupulously avoid appearing like a country preacher in Wendell Berry’s novel *A Place on Earth*, who “has what I reckon you would call a knack for the Hereafter. He’s not much mixed with this world.”

The embarrassment on the part of clergy also comes from their training. In most mainline seminaries, belief in heaven is rarely discussed. In my years in seminary, I

can’t remember the topic of heaven, at least as my congregation would recognize it, ever coming up. This is in part due to the influence of 20th-century theologians such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann and Jürgen Moltmann who have argued persuasively against viewing eschatology in personal terms. Their influence has made it hard to imagine oneself as a thinking Christian—someone who reads not only the Bible but also the *New York Times*—while making explicit claims about a heavenly life to come. As mainline seminarians enter the parish, they take with them the assumption that heaven is not a topic worthy of serious discussion.

This attitude not only places clergy out of step with the expectations of their parishioners but with contemporary culture as well. In recent years, our culture has been fascinated with heaven. A 2003 Harris poll, for instance, revealed that 82 percent of Americans profess to believe in heaven. A long-term study from the University of Chicago indicates that the number of Americans who believe in an afterlife has increased over the past 30 years, even as other measures of religious belief—such as church attendance—have significantly declined. When you start comparing results, it is tempting to think that more Americans believe in heaven than believe in God.

There is also an intensity of enthusiasm for the afterlife that cannot be captured by pollsters, a cultural craving that the distant shore of heaven be brought closer into view. This yearning is found in the lyrics of a song called “Heaven”—a surprising crossover hit on both pop and country charts.

Popular television shows, like HBO’s *Six Feet Under* and Showtime’s *Dead Like Me*, feature deceased characters who continue to make cameo appearances, remaining quite active even after their deaths. And, on the “new nonfiction” table at my local book store, I’ve spotted both the schmaltzy—*A Travel Guide to Heaven*—and the scholarly—a 700-page tome by an Ivy League professor, *Life After Death*: *A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*.

For grasping the cultural fascination with heaven, perhaps nothing compares to two recent best-selling novels about the afterlife: Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* and Mitch Albom’s *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. *The Lovely Bones* was published in mid-2002. Sebold’s publisher originally planned to print 35,000 copies. Three weeks later *The Lovely Bones* was already in its 11th printing. It has now sold over 3 million copies.

In his 2003 review of *The Lovely Bones* in the *New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn suggests that a way to measure reader engagement with any book is to count the number of customer reviews on Amazon.com. Eight months after its publication, *The Lovely Bones* had received 842 reviews, far more than other popular books. Two years later this number has grown to an astonishing 2,124. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* is on a similar path. Out for little more than a year, it has already received 957 customer reviews. It appeared near the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list the same week it was released and has remained there for 59 straight weeks. And an ABC-TV dramatization of it aired December 5.

How do we account for such success? Michael Pietsch, an executive with Little, Brown, publisher of *The Lovely Bones*, attributes part of the novel's surprising popularity to Sebold's imaginative portrait of heaven. The same is almost certainly true for *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. But these two novels are not only beneficiaries of the contemporary interest in heaven. Their creative portrayals of the afterlife also fuel our fascination.

In both novels, the main character is killed in the first few pages. Sebold begins with chilling tragedy. A dog comes trotting home with a strange-looking bone in its mouth. Soon everyone in the Philadelphia suburb knows that a little girl, Susie Salmon, has been raped and murdered. Albom's character, Eddie, is an unassuming maintenance worker at an amusement park who meets his demise in the predictably heroic fashion of a Hollywood script: he dies trying to save a little girl from a runaway ride.

Both novels take their characters to a personalized heaven made especially for them. Susie's heaven is the culmination of a 14-year-old's most fervent desires. There is a high school just like the one she never got to attend except that all the boys behave themselves, and the textbooks are limited to Susie's favorite reading material: *Seventeen*, *Glamour* and *Vogue*. Along with soccer fields and friendly dogs, heaven has an ice cream shop, where peppermint-stick ice cream is always in season. The most important place in Susie's heaven is a pretty gazebo where she can watch those she has left behind: her shattered father obsessively attempting to solve her murder, her stoic mother trying to escape a "ruined heart" through "merciful adultery," her baby brother struggling to understand that the word "dead" means Susie is never coming back.

In Albom's novel, Eddie wakes up in heaven and meets a succession of five people carefully selected just for him. Eddie's heavenly guides show him the true significance of his earthly life. They reveal that we are all connected. Our lives overlap in surprising ways. Seemingly inconsequential acts of sacrifice and love impact others in ways we could never imagine. It is the well-loved theme of the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Albom makes it his own by emphasizing that the purpose of life can be discovered only in an afterlife. The first person Eddie meets in heaven makes this clear. He explains, "Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, and that is what heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth."

This is a contemporary twist on the traditional notion that earth is but a school preparing us for heaven. Now the roles are reversed. Heaven exists for the purpose of shedding light on the meaning of our earthly existence.

There are of course some potential problems with such portraits. Observing Susie and Eddie in their own personalized versions of paradise, we witness the ultimate extension of designer handbags, designer coffee, even designer cars. The convergence of consumerism and individualism has so thoroughly shaped our lives that personal choice is not only our highest cultural value, it has become a central part of our eschatological imagination. In light of this, it is striking that after entering heaven both Susie and Eddie remain preoccupied with what they have left behind. Susie pines away in her little gazebo, and Eddie explores the mystery of his life on earth. The similarity of their experiences suggests the influence of the most popular cultural term for heaven—the rather flimsy *afterlife*. The word implies a residual, antecedent existence—a half-life merely left over from our primary existence on earth.

Why is this the favored term? Perhaps because embedded in every dream of life beyond death lies the threat of discontinuity. Will I still be *me* on the other side of death? Will I still possess the memories, desires and affections that made my earthly life unique? If not, how is heaven different from extinction? Contemporary people long for the tangible and specific—for soccer fields and peppermint ice cream—not merely as promises of future reward but as a way to emphasize continuity. It is better to risk an eternity of heartrending nostalgia than suffer the loss of personal identity. We crave a heaven that will validate, not repudiate, all we have been before.

This concern about identity sheds some light on why many parishioners find little comfort in strictly theocentric portraits of heaven. A few months ago, a man who had lost both his wife and son to cancer spoke up in a Bible study group: “I remember hearing a preacher say that we would recognize our families in heaven but we would not have any family relations. They would be familiar, but we wouldn’t share intimately as we had done on earth. And I thought to myself, How awful! I would hate to pass my son or my wife on the street in heaven and then go back to my own little house. I know this is a terrible thing to say, but if that is true, then heaven sounds a lot like hell to me.”

He was obviously looking for some guidance, but I had no idea what to say in response, having little understanding of the fullness of Christian hope from which to draw. I wish now I had simply assured him that heavenly union with God will not wipe out our essential identities. Every part of us worth saving—every relationship worth preserving—will be mercifully affirmed. This experience taught me that if I present heaven only as an abstract realm where we are lost in wonder, love and praise before God, I may have said what is most important, but I have not said enough.

The reluctance of clergy to help parishioners imagine the fullness of heavenly society results in a one-dimensional idea of paradise—a kind of never-ending Sunday school. On the way home from a youth beach trip, a 15-year-old admitted that he dreaded the thought of heaven. “Aren’t there other ways of saying thank you to God than just singing hymns?” he asked. “If we’re just going to sing God’s praises, heaven is going to get boring.” If, as a pastor, I have conveyed heaven to my congregation in a way that fails to evoke anticipation and delight, then I have failed to describe it appropriately. And despite their tendency toward the saccharine and the sentimental, Sebold and Albom succeed on precisely this point: they create for their readers an emotional connection to heaven. They present heaven as an actual place one might want to go.

One of the ways they do this is by recasting heaven in images appealing to a culture enamored with the therapeutic. When Susie enters her paradise, she is met by a deceased social worker named Hannah who serves as her “intake counselor.” Later, Susie discovers a kind of victims’ support group for all the girls who have been killed by her murderer. In Albom’s novel, Eddie’s pilgrimage through the five stages of heaven is a journey of self-discovery, an eternal program of personal development.

As with therapy, the first step in moving forward in eternity is to make sense of the past. Susie must accept the implications of her tragic death for her and her family. Eddie must wrestle with the apparent meaninglessness of his earthly existence. For a culture deeply imbued with Freudian assumptions, it should be no surprise that the healing necessary for eternal redemption is understood as a coming to terms with one's past.

As Susie and Eddie struggle with the past, readers are offered consolation. One of the lessons Susie learns in heaven is that the assumption that we are separated from loved ones is untrue: "The truth was very different from what we learned in school. The truth was that the line between the living and the dead could be . . . murky and blurred." These words could have been written as a direct response to the question "How far is heaven?" Sebold assures us that it is much closer than we think. Her novel, published six months after the nation watched the deaths of September 11 over and over on its television screens, bore a powerful message.

Death, of course, is not the only thing that brings us grief. We also mourn our failure to live authentically and fully. Rendered anonymous by faceless corporations and disintegrating communities, people are no longer sure their lives have significance. George Steiner describes this spiritual malaise as a "core-tiredness," the loss of "our capacity to hope, to truly speak in the future tense." Part of the cultural fascination with the perfected future state of heaven stems from our reaction to this loss. This is the point where Albom offers reassurance. He consoles us with the idea that the true significance of every person will finally be revealed in the afterlife. This will happen as we are reunited with those we have loved on earth, reminisce together, and finally discover just how tightly (and permanently) the ties of earthly love are bound.

And perhaps this is where the reticent, slightly embarrassed mainline clergy might clear their throats and enter the conversation. They have assumed for too long that when it comes to heaven, silence is the only viable option, given the overly explicit speculations of popular piety. They have failed to imagine alternatives. They can restate the Christian belief in heaven in a way that invites people to consider it anew. They can bring traditional themes forward, presenting them afresh to a culture already intrigued with heaven.

How can this be done? First, by considering the deep desires that fuel the present-day fascination. Karl Barth once instructed preachers that their goal should be to press through surface concerns in order to address something deeper in the hearts

of their hearers. This deeper concern is the question that will not leave them alone, the “incurable wound” that cuts close to the bone of human existence. It is also, Barth reminds us, the place where God addresses each of us through the death and resurrection of Christ.

A robust theology of heaven for our time would attempt two things: It would articulate the yearning beneath the culture’s preoccupation with heaven, and it would seek to address this yearning with the hope that arises from the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With Sebold and Albom as guides, one can dig deeper into people’s desire for heaven. The desire is not merely a wish to survive death or to be compensated for earthly struggles. It is more substantial, more vital than that. It is also timeless—not so different from the “immortal longings” evoked by Shakespeare or the anxious concerns John Calvin discerned in his parishioners. It is a desire for true fulfillment, an indescribable fullness that will somehow make sense of the emptiness of our existence.

What is different is that people are likely to interpret this desire through the dominant cultural metaphor of our age—the therapeutic. So when they experience this universal, timeless yearning, they are likely to envision the therapeutic ideals of deep consolation and genuine human flourishing—two worthy goals that the forces of this world and the conflicts in our hearts do not seem to allow.

Christians can help people recognize that embedded within this desire is a longing for God. The desires to be consoled and ultimately to flourish are good. God has implanted them in our hearts. Yet they will remain unfulfilled if oblivion is our end. True consolation and genuine flourishing call for the merciful presence of God. This is the yearning that God addresses in the resurrection, the one event that is central to all Christian hope. As Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reminds us, the message of the risen Christ is not only “I am risen” but also “I am with you.” Thus, at the point where our yearning is most acutely felt, we also receive the promise that Jesus’ resurrection is the the sign of our own, that those who “hunger and thirst” will ultimately be satisfied.

This is why one can’t help noticing that missing from these two novels is the central character—God.

That is a troubling omission, and it represents in part an indictment of Christians. When there is more talk of heaven in novels, television shows and pop songs than in sermons, Christians must shoulder some of the blame for the fact that visions of life beyond death fail to include God.

It is also a sign of how thoroughly contemporary culture has misunderstood the essence of human flourishing. Augustine puts the Christian alternative best in his oft-quoted words at the beginning of the *Confessions*. “O Lord,” he prayed, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is forever restless until it rests in you.” With this prayer, Augustine points to the *summum bonum* of both this world and the next: not the only good, but the highest, the one that gives life to all the rest. On earth and in heaven, we thrive and grow ultimately in relationship to God. People need this reminder. They need to consider the possibility that their desire for heaven is a kind of homesickness, a restlessness of soul that will remain unfulfilled until we are united with the One who created us—the One who remains the source of all true consolation and genuine flourishing.

I believe our culture is ready to hear this message. Perhaps, as Paul put it, they are even “standing on tiptoe.” For me, the only question that remains is whether I will be too embarrassed to tell it.