

HEAVEN (John 14:1-4)

Sermon by Bob Stelter

I rolled my window down and yelled at him. “Dave, get in,” I said, “you’ll freeze out there. Get in.”

We were going to the men’s homeless shelter at the Salvation Army in downtown Knoxville. Somebody from our church had donated a couple of large boxes of gloves and warm ski toboggans, the knitted caps. I didn’t want to wait until our usual time to go down to the shelter to bring the gloves and caps because we wouldn’t be going until late January. Our church had visited the shelter a couple of weeks before. The weather had been so cold and it was getting near to Christmas. I felt it would be a good time to make a warm delivery on a cold night. And Dave agreed to go along with me when I had asked him on Sunday morning at church.

So, he jumped in my truck. I poured him some hot chocolate that Lisa had made, pouring

carefully out of my old thermos. Before he could slurp it down, he blurted out: “Pastor Bob, now that I have you all alone, I want all the answers. Since I’ve been coming to your church, I feel like I’m really following Jesus. I resonate with that love God, love others, serve stuff you preach about. But I want all the answers and I want them now.”

He said, “Since I’ve been coming to worship every week, I have more questions. But the Bible is so big. I just don’t know where to start sometimes. Tell me what I need to be doing.”

I said, “Wow, we’re not even out of your neighborhood yet and you want to know it all.” But I understood what my friend was going through. Dave was enthusiastic, that’s a good word for him. Enthusiastic. He truly wanted to learn.

I turned the radio off so we could talk. I said, “You are right, the Bible can be overwhelming, but I’ve learned that sometimes the

Lord teaches us in other ways, too.”

I told him, “I’ve been a pastor for a long time and I won’t even begin to say that I have the Bible all figured out. But I do know, just when I need it, the Lord will teach me through some experience or some person and when that happens, the Bible becomes clearer to me.”

As we were getting on the interstate to go downtown, I asked him, “What is something you have questions about?”

Dave looked at the floorboard then toward the windshield. He looked out the side window, scratched his head and finally he said, “What about heaven?”

“What about it?” I asked him.

“Well, what is it going to be like? I mean, from what I’ve read, Jesus compares it to a lot of different things. In Revelation, it is described almost like a Las Vegas casino, with lots of brilliant lights and all sorts of people moving

about. I still have not figured heaven out.”

I hope he didn’t see me smiling, but I smiled. “I have never heard anyone describe heaven quite like that, a Vegas casino,” I told him.

And then Dave shifted in the passenger seat of my truck and he drank some more hot chocolate. He said, “I know how the Bible describes it, the way it looks like from the outside. But what I want to know is, what is it going to be like from the inside. I mean, that’s where we are going to be forever right? So, I’m curious what is in store for us? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I did. I truly did. That was the reason I invited him to go along with me this night. He was a good question asker. God had surely provided this opportunity. I said, “About heaven....my friend, you are in for an opportunity tonight if heaven is what you are wanting to know about.”

We were already downtown, I took the Summit Hill exit. Dave was

beginning to wonder how going to the shelter on Broadway and seeing all the people on the street underneath the interstate, how did all that have anything to do with heaven.

My heart and Dave's heart began to ache as we saw the big crowd of people in need. Dave said softly as we rolled down the street, "It's nearly Christmas time and all these people don't have homes to go to. No Christmas trees, no presents underneath. Not even a warm place to sleep tonight," Dave said.

"We're here," I said. We pulled into the shelter parking lot and jumped out. It was bitter cold, so we moved quickly. He grabbed a big box and I grabbed the other one. I rang the door to the entrance of the facility.

Over the monitor, a voice asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"It's Pastor Bob from Faith Lutheran Church, the church that comes every month. We've got

some warm things for the gentlemen.”

The intercom buzzed and the door unlocked. We went in. We carried these two big boxes and entered the day room where we always set up when our church makes our monthly visit.

We pulled out the hats and gloves and spread them on some tables. It wasn't long, there must have been 30 men. The shelter was full since it was so cold outside. No one walked away without gloves and a hat.

I've already told the family who donated those things just how genuinely happy and appreciative the men were to get those gloves and warm caps.

One of the shelter residents asked Dave, “Where are y'all from?”

Dave said, “Faith Lutheran Church. We drove a little ways to get here, but we wanted to bring you these things.”

The homeless man looked at Dave with suspicion. “What’s the catch?” he asked Dave.

Dave responded, “There ain’t no catch.”

The man said, “Well, isn’t this a miracle. I’ve been on the street every day this week, walking from place to place looking for work. It was so cold, I was ready to give up and not even try tomorrow. I about froze. These gloves and this hat, they will keep me warm. I appreciate this. It means a lot. Thank your church for me.”

Dave was sort of stunned. The men at the shelter will do it to you every time. They will say something profound or ask you a penetrating direct question.

Just like Dave had asked me some penetrating questions, now another resident of the shelter was asking Dave a question. He asked if Dave would pray for him.

I could hear this man. I remember seeing him when we had visited the shelter earlier that month. He

was telling Dave about losing his wife and his home in the Hurricane Helene floodwaters up near the community of Limestone. Said he lived in the Nolichucky River Gorge and described the terror of losing his home and his wife, both swept away as all he could do was watch. His employer closed the place where he worked, so he was truly homeless. Still grieving his wife. As Dave listened, I could see tears in his eyes. It was truly a tragic sad story.

He and Dave talked some more and Dave prayed with him right there. He didn't say, "I'll add you to the prayer chain or I'll give your prayer request to the pastor." No, he prayed with that gentleman. And when he was done, they talked some more.

While they were talking, I gave away all the rest of the hats and gloves. When Dave and the man finally finished talking, they hugged and traded phone numbers. Then Dave turned to me and asked if I needed help.

“Thanks a lot, you left me to do all the work,” I joked. But he had done the work. Listening and praying is good work. It’s why we go down there. He had done the Lord’s work.

It didn’t take long for us to give everything away and it felt like we had plenty of time on our hands. Dave stood up and walked over to me with his hand outstretched. “Give me your keys, Pastor. I want to drive up Broadway. I know a good Mexican place. I want to order a bunch of food and bring it back here for the guys.”

If you want to know what faith looks like, take a look. Because I handed him my keys and was kind of confident he would return. In about half an hour, he was back with so much food. Stacks and stacks of those huge take-out boxes of tacos and enchiladas and burritos and guacamole.

The guys at the shelter said it was an early Christmas dinner. We spread all the food out and jumped in. Nobody, I mean nobody was hungry that night as we finished.

All of us ate way more than we should have, but it was so much fun eating and laughing. There was even some to leave behind in case anybody was working that night and missed our fiesta.

We sat around and talked some more. It is always interesting to hear the guys at the shelter. They know each other so well, that comes from living together. And they look out for each other. But oh, how they like to joke with each other. And especially joke with those good church folk who come down there from Farragut.

Finally, it felt like it was time for Dave and me to go. On the way home, back down the interstate, Dave was quiet. He had been so full of questions on the way there, but now he was quiet, thinking, I guess.

Then he said, “That was fun. No, it was powerful. I’m going to go with you next time the group from church goes down there.” Then he paused. He looked out the window. “That’s it, isn’t it? Like a big shelter, a warm home where

everybody has their room, their space. And people helping people. People listening and loving on each other. And food, lots of food. Maybe even tacos. That's what heaven will be like, isn't it?"

"Sure is, Dave," I said. "Sure is."

And Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you with me, so that where I am, you may be also." -John 14:1-3