

Aug. 22, 2010

Hebrews 12:18-29

**“Close Encounters of a Heavenly Kind”**

When my husband and I were first married, I discovered he loves to read science fiction. At the time, I thought sci-fi novels were without many redeeming qualities—seeing them as pulp fiction with comic book characters and story lines. I wondered why he liked them. Of course, I hadn’t read any of his favorite authors MYSELF, but still I figured I was right.

Then I became pregnant for the first time. I had the proverbial strange food cravings—not dill pickles and ice cream, but close: green olives and French fries, cole slaw and chocolate chip cookies. And, surprising myself immensely, I developed an interest in reading science fiction! And, you know, it wasn’t always totally stupid—some of it was pretty good! It dealt with human struggle and conflict, dilemmas about the meaning of human existence. It emerged out of our fascination with “otherworldliness”, which lives deep within the human soul.

When I was a teen, there was a popular song in which the singer spoke of events in her life and plaintively asked, “Is that all there is? --- to life, love etc. etc. Is that all there is?”

Science fiction grows out of our wondering, “Is this all there is—to life, love, existence?”

Old classic science fiction movies like “E. T.” and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” offered a vision that said, “No! This isn’t all there is—there’s more, much more, beyond what we commonly see and experience.” I loved the message of these movies--- that there IS more to life and the universe than what we can see. There are mysteries and wonders for us to discover. There are beings to meet with whom we might have friendships. “E.T.” showed me I am not alone to feel longings for a faraway “home” sometimes, a mysterious home that I don’t really remember but long for deeply. These films invite us to believe in the power of love winning over science and technology when they deny the reality of mystery, wonder, power, and miracles.

Science fiction is one response to potent longings for the otherworldly. Faith is another.

Science fiction uses one set of symbols to describe what we might call “religious experience”. Mystics through Christian history have tried to describe their communion with Christ; they have used other language and different symbols, but I think the experiences are similar. There is a mystical quality to good science fiction. Beautiful haunting music echoes and floats in the atmosphere. There is a feeling of peace, combined with surging excitement and possibility. There is a distinct sense of standing outside ordinary human experience.

Are you getting nervous? Are you wondering, “Is Ronni suggesting there is extra-terrestrial life? Is she suggesting that Christ was a being from another planet?” You can relax. I don’t have any idea of what other life forms might exist in the universe. I am convinced that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully God. Christians are not called to seek extraterrestrial life. We are called to follow Jesus in the life we have been given here on earth.

But I do think something in us longs for the mysterious and otherworldly, and we express that longing in books and movies through symbols that may not be religious themselves, but are tied to religious wonderings and feelings in all human beings.

We’ve been reflecting on texts from the letter to Hebrews in recent weeks. According to Bob Jewett, Bible scholar and one of my former professors, this New Testament letter was written to Christians suffering persecution, living in modern-day Turkey around 50-60 A.D. The whole letter recognizes these Christians’ longings for a better place, for arrival before the throne of God. But they felt God was very far away on his mighty throne. They were trapped in this world, and wanted to get to the “otherworld”. They saw two options:

1. Either we are held captive by hostile forces who inflict horrors upon us without mercy;

OR

2. We successfully manipulate these forces so we can MOVE OUT OF our suffering into another world which is held in God’s hands.

Bob Jewett contends that a companion of Paul, Epaphras, wrote this letter to his friends in Turkey and that he tried to expose their confusion and set them straight. He told them, “You’ve got your options wrong! THESE are your choices:

1. EITHER you escape from the world God has given us into security and comfort, making those your IDOLS:

OR

2. You band together as pilgrims on a journey to God's Promised Land, FACING challenges and obstacles you encounter in this world. But as you FACE these, KNOW that God is NOT far away in another world, but travels with you in this one.

The writer presents these two choices as different ways of worshipping and living. He portrays the worship of the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, as a step in the WRONG direction.

“Don't go back,” he says, “Don't go back to thinking about God in those ways!” His picture of Mt. Sinai emphasizes the people's fear and terror. They had no desire for communication with God. They begged him for no further messages. The Christians in Turkey assumed the way of the soul in trying to reach God was barred by cosmic powers similar to the threats of fire and darkness, gloom and storm in this portrayal. “Don't look at God, or at life this way,” the writer teaches.

“Instead, realize you HAVE COME to the heavenly Jerusalem”, he says. “You HAVE COME to Mt. Zion, to the city of the living God,” he tells these persecuted Christians. This had to be hard for them to believe. It is for us, too, sometimes. But the message of Scripture here proclaims that EVEN IN THE MIDST of adversity IN THIS WORLD, we encounter the divine realm, the other world. We don't have to wait for Close Encounters of a Heavenly Kind. The access to God's world that the Lycus Valley Christians had tried to attain is pictured here as a reality they had been experiencing all along.

Close encounters of a heavenly kind are not postponed to the end of life. They happen when we are caught, in the midst of the ordinary, by the presence and glory of the living God.

(Share an example of a Close Encounter of a Heavenly Kind- in Rebecca Manley Pippert's *Hope Has its Reasons*, pp131-132).

We are promised that our “otherworld” God is LEADING US RIGHT NOW in our regular world lives. We are not promised all happy events, no pain or struggle. We ARE promised close encounters with our God WHO CANNOT

BE SHAKEN BY ANY POWERS OR EVENTS OF ANY KIND! We are promised God-with-us now, and God with us in a future realm that is not yet complete.

The kingdom God gives us is the UNSHAKEABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD HIMSELF- OFFERED TO US DAY BY DAY IN THE VERY CENTER OF THE STORMS OF LIFE.

As we journey we taste morsels of the heavenly banquet. We hear snatches of heavenly music. We feel the peace, the power, the excitement of the world we long for. Our complete and full experience of that world is still for tomorrow, but we encounter it here, day by day. We thank our God, and look forward to what tomorrow will bring. Amen.