



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Author of the World's joy,  
Bearer of the World's pain,  
At the heart of all our distress  
Let unconquerable gladness dwell.  
Dag Hammarskjold

Life as a pilgrimage, heaven its goal ...  
Unlike those medieval journeys through  
space, however, the moment we put our  
foot on the road to heaven, we're already  
there!



For nearly two thousand years one hymn has opened the act at the heart of Christian worship. The Lord's Supper, Eucharist, Holy Communion, Mass; by whatever name the sacrament is known, it begins with the Sanctus. *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus* chanted in Latin, *Holy, Holy, Holy* said or sung in a thousand modern tongues, not just here on earth but as the old prayer book puts it, "with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven."

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts,  
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory!

For decades now I've repeated these words with other Christians at least twice a week, often every day. Thousands and thousands of times as I prepare to take the Lord's Body and Blood, "Holy, Holy, Holy ... "

For a long time, though, one word of the Sanctus was impossible for me to say.

*Full.*

"Heaven" to me was still a theoretical realm. A place "full of thy glory" sounded suitably vague and lofty. But earth? Earth was real - containing much that was

glorious, but also much ugliness and tragedy. How could earth be "full" of Gods glory?

## Losing Battle

Yet the church insists on it. "Our bounden duty," in the old prayer book's wording, is to proclaim the Sanctus "at *all* times, and in *all* places."

For years I wrestled, as Christians have through the centuries, to reconcile my dawning belief in God with the all too obvious existence of evil. I'd weigh my fledgling faith against the calamities in the daily paper - murders, floods, earthquakes, war. My faith always lost these intellectual battles.

Meanwhile, though, through the individual men and women who shared their stories with me, I was encountering a different reality. Good experienced in the very clutches of evil itself.

Clyda Holbrook and her husband were stabbed by the thieves who robbed their motel. Though permanently disabled, Clyda survived; her beloved husband did not. But the woman I met in Eureka, California, far from being bitter, was launching a "love-wave" in her community to counter the crime-wave that had taken her husband.

Chet Bitterman's twenty-eight-year-old son, a missionary in Colombia, was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists. The young man left a wife, two small children, unfulfilled dreams. But when I visited his father in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I didn't hear about vengeance. I heard that his son's memorial fund was going to provide the ambulance needed by a Colombian village.

Edith Taylor's husband of twenty-four years obtained a mail-order divorce in order to marry a nineteen-year-old. But the day I called on Edith in Waltham, Massachusetts, her home rang with the laughter of two little girls and glowed with the love between two women. The other woman was the husband's second wife. When his death left her and their two small children destitute, Edith took all three into her heart and home.

Listening to a hundred stories like these, I kept seeing that cross shining at the end of the aisle at St. Mark's. The cross, tool of death, symbol of life everlasting. The cross where the vertical of heaven intersects the horizontal of a suffering world.

## The Closet

For Father Samuel Brinckerhoff, to whose memorial service Sandra Aldrich had come, this heavenly intersection was everywhere.

We were very new Christians; he was a very old one. Ordained in 1907, Father Brinckerhoff had come to St. Mark's in his retirement, assisting there till his death at nearly ninety. White-haired and stooped, he seemed to me to move about the church in a little personal patch of sunlight. An office had been created for him in what had been a storage closet - barely room for a small desk and chair.

I don't remember what took John and me to this tiny office to see him one day; I only recall that to receive visitors, he had to stand and push the chair to the desk. Whatever our errand, the conversation soon turned, as every conversation with this happy man did, to the joy of the Lord.

*Maybe angels felt this joy, I remember thinking, but where is the evidence of it in the real world just now?* This was during our national agony in Vietnam, when the word *overkill* had entered the language. After walking for years in unavailing peace marches, I'd become disillusioned about humankind's ability to stop killing one another.

"There may be joy in heaven," I said to the old priest, "but where do you see it here on earth?"

Father Brinckerhoff turned his mild blue eyes on mine. "On earth?" he repeated. "But - " he flung his arms as far apart as they would go in the narrow room, "*this* is the kingdom of heaven!"

Looking at him as he stood in his little pool of radiance, I knew not only that I'd met someone who believed unshakably in a real heaven, but that he was already inhabiting it.

Ever since, my favorite image of heaven has been a cramped little room and a man with the light of eternity in his eyes.