

“He Descended Into Hell”

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Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

39 But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42 “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 “For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

HE DESCENDED INTO HELL

We say it each week
when we say the Apostle’s Creed.
“He descended into hell.”

Jesus descended into hell.
Do you know what that means?

That was the question I was asked by the examinations committee when I first became a minister.

And I didn't know the answer.

I thought I'd been well trained by my seminary,
but this was apparently a blind spot.

Maybe I was sick the day they talked about this?
Maybe we didn't talk that much about hell?
I don't know.

But, since we say this each week,
we need to ask the question.
What do we mean when we say that Jesus descended into hell?

One interpretation is to say that Jesus
"descended to the dead".
It's another way of saying that Jesus really died.
This is essentially the view of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

You may notice that the ecumenical version of the Apostle's Creed (found on page 14 in the front of of your hymnals) chooses this translation.

Calvin suggests that Jesus' suffering on the cross was like hell.

Jesus died for our sins on the cross
and so he literally took our place in this "hell".

I've since learned that this line in the Creed has been viewed as problematic.

Perhaps the original version of the Creed didn't even have this line.

HELL IN OUR PASSAGE

On the other hand the Bible does talk about hell.

In fact you may have noticed that hell plays a prominent role in our lesson for today.

How did Jesus put it?

“If your hand offends you, cut it off.
Better to go through life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell.”

“If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.”

“If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out;
it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell...”

Where is hell?

According to our passage it's the place of unquenchable fire.
It's the place where the “worm” never dies.

I don't know about you,
but Jesus has me convinced.

I want to avoid that place at all costs.

CONTEXT

Many in the past have gotten very fanciful in their interpretation of this passage.

They have emphasized the horror of hell in order to make sure that people tow the party line when it comes to church dogma and practice.

But, it seems to me that if we do that,
we ignore the context of this passage.

Who is Jesus warning in this passage?
Jesus is not warning those outside the faith.
Jesus is warning his own disciples.

John comes to Jesus and says,

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

This often happens in the church.
If someone is not following us”,
then we condemn them.
We discount what they say and do.

We tell them to stop.
No unauthorized exorcisms on our watch!

But, notice that Jesus takes
a much more lenient approach.
He tells John,

“Don’t stop him!

If he does such powerful works in my name,
he’s not going to speak ill of me later on.

In fact, if he’s not against us, he’s for us!
If someone gives even so much as a cup of water in my name, that person
is not going to lose their reward.”

Jesus believes that this unauthorized exorcist is on the road to faith.

And the proof is in what he is doing.

He’s doing good in Jesus’ name.
And it would be terribly wrong to stop him.

STUMBLING BLOCKS AND LITTLE ONES

Jesus puts it this way,

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,
it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck
and you were thrown into the sea.”

Now that's strong language!
If you get in the way of one of these "little ones",
you'd be better off dead.

People attempting to do good in Jesus' name are "little ones" who need to be protected.

This is reminiscent of the passage that we studied last week.
Jesus put his arms around a little child and told the disciples,

"If you welcome a child into your life, you welcome me and the One who sent me."

Apparently the converse is also true.

If you reject the little ones, those who are vulnerable and trying to do good in Jesus' name,
then you reject Jesus and the One who sent Him.

To put it another way,
you are in danger of going to hell.

And disciples should do anything
in order to avoid that.
If your hand offends you, cut it off...and so forth.
Better to be maimed than to go to hell.

A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

Hell has been used down through the ages to threaten those who were not part of the church.

But, as my theology professor used to put it,
in the Bible things are actually reversed.
"Heaven is for sinners, and
hell is for the good people.

Jesus' words of invitation and promise most often are made to people who are obviously sinners: dishonest tax collectors, political and social outcasts, and religious heretics condemned by orthodox believers."

And who did Jesus threaten with hell?
The religious people, the Scribes and the Pharisees.

And, as we see in our passage for today,
sometimes these warnings were aimed at Jesus' own disciples.

And I think these warnings are aimed at us as well.

Don't become a stumbling block to the "little ones".
Find ways to encourage
and work with those who do God's work,
even if they are not "one of us".

Jesus had an expansive view of salvation.
He talked about "other sheep"
who were not of this fold.
In other words, salvation would no longer be limited to one flock, to one
group of people. (John 10:16)

In Jesus salvation was coming to the whole world. (John 3:16)

Instead of finding ways to judge and exclude people,
Jesus came to remove roadblocks and welcome many into the Kingdom.

In the words of a hymn,
"There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea."

And that's what we put our trust in,
the wideness of God's mercy,
and NOT in our own righteousness.

When we humbly acknowledge
that we are sinners in need of God's grace,
we're less likely to become a stumbling block to fellow travelers on the road
to faith.

This events of this past week remind me that our society is quick to pass
judgment.

If someone is not “following us” then they must be lying and need to be stopped.

This cycle of judgment is reinforced by social media and the news cycle.

Once again the Christian way is out of step with the ways of the world.

The gospel requires us to reserve judgment.

The gospel requires us to wish everyone well and hope for the best.

As Jesus put it,

“If they’re not against us, they’re for us.”

Notice the subtle difference.

We often hear people say,

“If they’re not for us, they’re against us.”

But, Jesus says takes that common proverb and turns it upside down.

“If they’re not against us, they’re for us.”

I take this to mean that Jesus wants his disciples to see the potential for faith in everyone.

No one is beyond the reach of God’s saving grace.

To say it another way, we don’t give up on anyone.

We don’t throw anyone away.

GEHENNA

When Jesus talks about hell, he uses the Greek word “Gehenna”.

This word has a specific history.

Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom.

This was a literal place where some kings of Judah engaged in forbidden religious practices, including human sacrifice by fire.

Thankfully King Josiah put an end to this sacrilege, and he destroyed the places where these sacrifices took place.

In fact the Jews hated this place so much that they made Gehenna into a garbage dump.

They not only threw their refuse into this place but also the bodies of animals and unburied criminals who had been executed.

Since fires were always need to consume the dead bodies, the place was filled with a terrible smell.

You can see why Gehenna became a synonym for hell.
Hell is a garbage dump.

Have you ever been to the garbage dump?
Our modern dumps, thankfully are not as bad as Gehenna.

Oh, they smell bad and it's amazing what huge mounds of garbage we make.

But, we've become quite adept at covering up these landfills and disguising them.

There are some quite nice subdivisions in our area that overlook these beautified garbage dumps.

But, there's one dead giveaway that those mounds are not as benign as they look.

There are PVC pipes sticking up from the ground.
Do you know why?

Methane gas.
What lies beneath in a garbage dump is still dangerous.

In fact, if we didn't have those PVC pipes, the dump would explode!

What we throw away every day is dangerous.
We need to be more aware of our environment and how we deal with our waste.

Maybe we throw away too much stuff.

In a sense, hell lurks beneath the surface of our garbage dumps!

DON'T THROW AWAY PEOPLE

And just as we should be reluctant to throw too much stuff away, maybe we should be even more reluctant to throw away people.

God's kingdom is not about trying to decide who's "following us" and who's not.

The goal of God's kingdom is to create a space where the grace of God is made available to as many people as possible.

The goal of God's kingdom is to encourage those who cast out demons.
The goal of God's kingdom is to reward those who give a cup of water to the thirsty in the name of Jesus.

Instead of being so hell-bent on what is going wrong.
Maybe we focus on what is going right.

I've been reading a book about Transitional Ministry.
That's what we used to call interim ministry.

How do we help congregations that are going through a significant transition? That's what this book is all about.

In particular, I was intrigued by a chapter on something called appreciative inquiry.

This author contends that when a church is going through a transition, we often spend too much time analyzing what is wrong and not nearly enough time talking about what is right.

If we encourage the telling of positive stories about ministry, that creates an opportunity for spiritual development.

Yes, we're not perfect.
Yes, we're not following Jesus as nearly as we should.

But, what are we doing right?

What demons are we casting out?
Can we think of a time when we bring a cup of water to those who are thirsty?

That's what really matters.

Grace encourages us to be open to others,
and have a positive attitude about their attempts to do ministry.

We will not give up on anyone.
We will not consign anyone
to that junkyard called hell.

And we will not condemn ourselves
to that place either.

How we treat others has an effect
on how we view ourselves.

If we are gracious toward others, we receive grace.
If we encourage others, we receive encouragement.
If we forgive the sins of others, we experience forgiveness.

And it is this gracious lifestyle that defeats the powers of hell.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Jesus is using hyperbole in this passage.
He really didn't want disciples to mutilate themselves in an attempt to avoid hell.

But, he did encourage his disciples on many occasions to deny themselves,
take up a cross and follow him.

He did say many times,
"For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,
will save it."

This willingness to sacrifice for the little ones is illustrated by the cross.

Jesus willingly went to that place where people were thrown away forever.
He went to Golgotha.

He was crucified by people he loved.
And yet, as he died, he forgave them.

I agree with Calvin and those who wrote the Westminster Confession.

Jesus did descend into hell.

On the cross he went to hell to save us all.
And he did descend into the place of the dead for three days.

But, the story does not end with hell.
On the third day he rose again from the dead.

Hell was defeated.
The darkness was overcome by the light.
Hope defeated despair.

And that is the message we preach today.

SALTED WITH FIRE

In conclusion Jesus tells his disciples,

“For everyone will be salted with fire.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?

Have salt in yourselves,
and be at peace with one another.”

In the coming days
the disciples will be salted with fire.

Not only will they witness the crucifixion,
they will also desert Jesus in his hour of need.

As the world grows dark in the middle of the day,
the world of the disciples will grow dark as well.

Jesus has descended into hell
on the cross and in the grave.
And the disciples will experience their own descent into hell, a hell of their
own making.

But, just as God in Christ
defeated hell through the cross and resurrection,
so the disciples will know a new life as well.

God in Christ will use this terrible experience to deepen the spiritual lives of
the disciples.

The disciples will come to appreciate the gospel
through this process of failure and restoration.

They will be purified by fire.
In the humility of their defeat
they will learn the glory of salvation.

They will be salted by fire.

Perhaps, the same is true for us.

None of us can truly appreciate the gospel until we learn through experi-
ence what it means to be forgiven.

The “salt” of the gospel is purified in our life through the hard lessons of fail-
ure and restoration.

Many of you probably know that salt was greatly prized in the ancient
world.

The only way food could be preserved was through the use of salt.

In fact salt was so precious that people were sometimes paid for their ser-
vices with salt.

And of course that’s where we get the idea that someone is “worth their
salt.”

It means that they have earned their pay.

How can we Christians be worth our salt?

Well, we must retain our flavor.
And the flavor of salty Christians
tastes a lot like God's grace.

We remember that not so long ago,
we too were far from the promises of God.
Not so long ago, we too were without hope.

But, God in Christ saved us.
He brought us into His family through the power of forgiveness.

By grace we have been saved
and so we bring a message of grace to the world.

We must not let our lives
be adulterated by the ways of the world.
We cannot lose our saltiness.

We cannot let ourselves be caught up a world where violence and mistrust
reign supreme.

Jesus concludes this passage by telling the disciples,

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

In the crucible of life, we learn what this means.

We learn to forgive.
We learn to give thirsty people a cup of water.

We learn what it means to have God's peace.

Paul described that peace as:

a peace that passes all understanding,
a peace that guards our hearts and minds,
a peace that keeps us in harmony with the ministry and message of Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7)

May God grant us this peace.

Amen.