

Knowledge of Hell  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
August 23, 2009  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture  
Old Testament Psalm 36:1-4  
New Testament Mark 15:33-39

As the weeks of summer wind down, so, too, do the number of Sundays we have to reach into the Summer Sermon Grab Bag. As I've said before, your questions and ideas have been a wonderful source of preaching this summer ... and I am deeply grateful for the thought you put into your faith, even when you have more questions than answers, because surely a humble faith is better than a presumptuous one.

Because we have more cards from the Grab Bag left than we do Sundays, I'm inclined again to try to bundle today at least three of your inquiries that touch on a common theme, which might be summarized as the afterlife.

Specifically, one of you is curious about what we might expect in life everlasting. One of you wants to know whether we will know our family and friends in the afterlife. And one of you wants to know what we mean when we say in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus descended into hell before he ascended into heaven and took his seat there to rule over the church.

Trying to address fully all three of those surely risks opening more cans of worms than we can ever get closed in about 20 minutes. Besides, that last question, raises an even larger one – is there a hell and what do we know about it? So let's start there – because, let's admit it: At one time or another, if we've every really thought about our faith, the question of hell has probably scared, well, the you-know-what out of us.

\* \* \*

One of the many commentators I read on the subject of hell notes that, whatever it is, it is a non-negotiable for people of faith. It is a staple of the Christian vocabulary.

It's equally true that the mainline church tends to avoid the subject, for reasons I can't fully explain. We Protestants don't have a developed doctrine of hell, as we do with other subjects such as the trinity or the sovereignty of God. A few years ago, the Presbyterian Church put out this little guide to the church, titled The Presbyterian Handbook, which we give new members. It's helpful, even humorous at places. It goes

so far as to name the bone in the foot that was pierced in crucifixion, but I couldn't find a word in all of its 200 pages about hell.

It's ironic, isn't it? As one of two directions for us to go, hell is inextricably linked to other topics for which we have full doctrines, such as sin and grace. Perhaps even the great scholars just don't like to think about it. Either way, the result is that we've left the door open for a lot of damage to be done to the church by bad preaching and teaching about hell based on bad theology.

If I asked you to paint the traditional picture of hell, what would it include? Let's hear some ideas (interaction with congregation).

So, where does that image come from?

The Old Testament refers to a place called, Sheol, thought by biblical writers to be an underworld that was the place of the dead. The picture might have been enhanced in the New Testament by the word Gehenna, which is often translated as hell. Gehenna was a site near Jerusalem where idol worshippers threw children into a fire and pagan priests would beat drums and clang cymbals to cover the sounds of the screaming.

Writers have taken that image in different directions. Milton's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, along with Dante's Inferno stand among the greatest works in western literature.

The wonderful British theologian C.S. Lewis played on the notion of fallen angels being in charge of hell in his poignant book, The Screwtape Letters. It's a compilation of dispatches from a junior devil to his boss, Screwtape, about the junior devil's attempt to distract an average man from God. In another of Lewis' books, ghosts from hell take a bus ride to heaven to see what it's like. But because they are so separated from God in their spiritually bankrupt character, they prefer to return to hell because they cannot fathom the joy of being with God forever.

These are just some of the interpretations of hell in what we might call its popular sense, a physical place of fire, agonizing punishment and eternal damnation.

\* \* \*

Now, to take up the question about Jesus going to hell, as confessed in the Apostles' Creed. It's important to remember that the Apostle's Creed was not written all at once. It evolved over 600 years or so, beginning in about 180 A.D. The phrase "he descended into hell" was added in the fifth century.

Historically, the church has interpreted this phrase to mean not that Jesus went there to pay some personal penance, because Christ was without sin. No, God in Christ descended into hell to demonstrate that nothing is out of God's reach, that it includes not just heaven and earth, but even hell. In this, we find in these words reason for hope, not fear.

Now, I realize that may not make immediate sense ... or at least it bears a little more elaboration, which brings us to our New Testament text in the Gospel of Mark: The story of Christ's cry of abandonment on the cross.

Riders on our Red Bus Bible Study class will recognize these verses from our class just last week.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lemi sabachthani?", which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These are difficult words to hear – and to understand. It's hard for us to understand how Christ suffered so deeply, even to the point of feeling abandoned by God. Did the drama on the cross have to go that far, we want to ask? What are we to take away from the realization that Jesus felt such isolation?

If we believe that God came into the world in Jesus Christ, fully divine yet fully human, and experienced every moment, every emotion, every aspect of the human endeavor, even agony on the cross, we know that there is nothing we can ever feel or experience that our God hasn't.

In turn, we know that, even if for but a moment, Christ experienced the absolute depth of agony, yet still called out the name of the God to whom he belonged. Perhaps it is not too far a reach to say that even before he descended into hell, Jesus felt hell on earth in that moment. Yet he still cried out to his God.

Is Jesus' desperate cry proof that he lost faith, even just for a moment? Absolutely not, writes commentator Dr. Clifton Black - rather, the opposite.

The reason we may dupe ourselves into this misjudgment is because we, unlike Mark, often tend to mistake faith for the power of positive thinking. They are not

the same. Jesus' last words in Mark are a prayer to a God that Jesus could no longer see. That is faith. Indeed, could there be any faith greater than that?<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

That's fine, John, some of you may still be thinking. That was Jesus.

But you still really haven't answered the question: Is there a hell? Is it a specific place, with eternal flame and anguish where its residents live sleeplessly and hopelessly, overruled by horned demons with pitchforks and long tails? Whatever it is, how do we make sure we don't end up there? Just give us the rulebook, we might say, and we will stay within the line on the field. If we have already risked our fate, just tell us what we need to do to make it all good again while we still have time?

Is that what we are to think? Is that how we are to live?

Shirley Guthrie, the great professor and scholar and reformed thinker, looks at it differently. In his enormously helpful book, Christian Doctrine, he offers these thoughts, which I will quote in length because I cannot say it any better.

"It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell," Guthrie says, quoting another theologian, Reinhold Niehbur.

Guthrie continues:

Why? First, because no one knows the answers to many of the questions our curiosity leads us to ask about the future. It is foolish to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God wants us to know .... (Even) the biblical writers were not interested in the details of "what it will be like." They did not worry about the future because they understood their own and the world's future to me in the hands of the God who in Jesus Christ has triumphed and will triumph over all the powers of suffering, sin, injustice and death.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

What, then, is the role of hell in our vocabulary and lives as believers?

---

<sup>1</sup> Journey Through the Bible, volume 10, Mark. P 100

<sup>2</sup> Christian Doctrine, p. 382

Perhaps all we need to know about hell is that it is the place of eternal separation from God. If sin is anything that separates us from God, hell is its final destination, the place where people go who, in the words of Psalm 36, “do not reject evil.”

Our faith is toothless, and therefore worthless, if we believe anything less. As we will say in our affirmation of faith in a moment, “God is not to be trifled with.”

But, friends, by the same token, God gets the final word, and that word is hope.

In another one of our confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1526, we find hope in this explanation of why Jesus descended into hell.

That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains and terrors in his soul both on the cross and before.

What are your hellish anxieties?

Getting a job or not losing the one you have? Getting sick? Being alone? Not having enough or being able to provide for others?

What is your unspeakable anguish?

Losing a loved one, a soul mate, perhaps, or the chance that may happen? Being trapped in your own insecurity and doubt? Watching a relationship slowly unravel with no idea what the future holds?

What are your pains and terrors?

Whatever they may be, friends, know in your heart that Christ our Lord has redeemed you. Trust that as the truth and live as if you believe it. And you will abide in the presence of God, which is after all, a perfectly fine definition of heaven.

Amen.