

Psalm 69:16-25
Revelation 20:11 – 21:4

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

He Descended into Hell

And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la ma sabach tha ni?"
that is, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" *Matthew 27:46*

Back in May we considered, in a sermon, "What heaven?" Now in response to a request for a sermon—and I'm always eager to hear your needs—we ask what hell is. Specifically, why does our Apostles' Creed say that after his excruciating torture and death on the cross, Jesus "descended into hell"?

We don't find this phrase in the Bible. And it's not uncommon to find churches that don't say "he descended into hell" when using the Apostles' Creed. Indeed, it's a common enough omission that Presbyterian pastors, when guest preaching at unfamiliar churches, typically ask of an elder before beginning worship, "By the way, do you 'descend into hell'?"

Why the choice? Because the earliest forms of the Apostle's Creed don't contain it. The statement that Jesus, at his death on the cross, "descended into hell" was added to the creed somewhere in the 12th or 13th century A.D., at a time when the church was really struggling to define the meaning of the cross in the ministry of Jesus, what are called "atonement theories." That is to say, how do Jesus' death and the cross become salvific for us, how do they save us? The torturous journey through these half dozen atonement theories, their meaning and their rise and fall, may best suit another time and place, if you wish.

Hell as a *place*, like heaven as a place with a geographic location in this or some other universe, is fraught with problems of consistent scriptural support in both testaments, not to mention rational problems. But hell as a state of being, a real affliction widely experienced, is well known even perhaps to all of us, hopefully fleetingly, sometimes pathologically, occasionally resulting in such overwhelming despair as to resolve to commit suicide. Hell is a real experience.

I cannot shake the memory of a night, two years ago when Jane and I were awakened by a phone call at 2 a.m. from the Seattle police (Katherine had gone to Seattle to live for a year), telling us that Katherine's pocket book, with purse and cell phone intact, had been found in a Seattle park late that night. But there were no signs of Katherine. The next two hours were excruciating beyond my ability to share. We prayed fiercely, we wept holding each other for long periods. And when, finally, Katherine called at 4 a.m., I fell into what I can only describe as a wretched guttural moaning as a dark and desperate agony of loss struggled to make way to utter relief and joy. Katherine had been at a concert with friends. They had left the stadium at intermission to play soccer in the dark in the adjacent park, where she laid her pocketbook down, then promptly forgot it in the rush back to the concert. Discovering the loss, she imagined she'd left it in the ladies' room.

Or the night last December when I raced through darkness on I-95 for the second time in twenty-four hours to see Carolyn, who had given birth prematurely to Ellie, then gone into a deathly toxic shock called HELLP Syndrome. Hell, as you must know from extreme experience, becomes horrifyingly real and overwhelming in such helplessness.

Now, no one would go there voluntarily to suffer that sort of hideous emptiness and pain. No one. Except one. Jesus did.

On the cross Jesus uttered his last discernible words: "My God *my* God! Why have *you* forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) From the first moment, perhaps in adolescence or even childhood when he discerned the sweet yet terrible consequences of the role God held out for him, and he pledged himself to it, he knew what would happen at the end. The thought of how it would end must always have been with him. Knowing can be the mind's unbearable burden. He knew he would suffer as people suffer who stand against the supremely powerful

and challenge their right to lead. He knew they would be unswervingly vengeful and malicious, that they would find a way to be rid of him. And at the last they would turn the screw to make the pain prolonged, unendurable, even delighting in the warning it sent billboard high to those who so much as toyed with the thought of opposing them.

Still, in and of itself even a death of this sort has no power to redeem the lives of others. It may have a striking moral influence, like one's learning of the exceptional valor of one who won the British Victoria Cross or the Congressional Medal of Honor. But Jesus took this much farther. He made it his mission to embrace every human being with the love of God, by adopting *all the consequence* of their violation of God, their disinterest with or denial of the very God who formed them, consequences of the brokenness and pain they had inflicted on each other, and of their violence to and abuse of their own best selves. He did this so that if, through his actions, they should grasp how thoroughly God did love them, how God yearned for their partnership in making the world over, they might turn again toward such love to learn from God how to truly live.

To take the burden of such universal pain and lostness where the soreness of the soul will not depart, and to experience it really, is to enter *voluntarily* that state we call hell. To be in solidarity with every stricken soul of the world, living and departed, and with the embrace of God's love, invite them home, is to descend into their hell. "He descended into hell" where God seems non-existent. And when he uttered that awful cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me," it was *their* cry. Isn't that what hell feels like—utter aloneness! And absorbing their pain, Matthew says, "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last [giving up his spirit]" (Matthew 27:50).

There was not anywhere that Jesus was unwilling to go, either in life or death. In life he faced the brutal and often indifferent Roman authorities, the powerful temple priests, the political elite of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He lived among those whom 'civil society' often treats with a shrug or polished indifference, the lost, the street people, the dying, the untouchable dead. He ate with those who have no table fellowship. He went among prostitutes hovering on street corners or in dimly lit doorways. He consorted with lepers and despised tax collectors (despised because they were in league with the Romans), sinners, lost and lonely beings of every hue. He went to one like the subject of Paul Simon's lyrics in "the Boxer:

"I am just a poor boy, though my story is seldom told.
I have squandered my resistance,
For a pocketful of mumbles, such are promises.
All lies and jest.
Still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.

When I left my home and family I was no more than a boy,
In the company of strangers,
In the quiet of the railway station, runnin' scared,
Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters,
Where the ragged people go,
Lookin' for the places only they would know.
Lie la lie . . .

In *Keeper of the Word*, William Stringfellow writes,

The Body of Christ [that's us, by the way!] lives in the world on behalf of the world. For lay folk in the church this means that there is no forbidden work. There is no corner of human existence, however degraded or neglected, into which they may not venture. No person, however beleaguered or possessed, who they may not befriend and represent.

. . . Christians are distinguished by their radical esteem for the incarnation [meaning, God in a human being; that's also us, not just Jesus; the only difference is, in us it's God waiting to get out more often]

[Christians are distinguished, ten] by their reverence for the life of God in the whole of creation, even and, in a sense, especially, God in creation in the travail of sin. The characteristic place to find Christians is among their enemies.

The first place to look for Christ is in hell.

Paul Simon's lyrics in "The Boxer" go on,

Asking only workman's wages I come lookin' for a job.
But I get no offers,
Just a come-on from the whores on Seventh Avenue.
I do declare, there were times when I was so lonesome,
I took some comfort there . . .

On a cold January night in 1970 (the year before I met Jane), the ship on which I worked, the QE2, was docked then at East 52nd Street. I had been out with friends in Manhattan and was walking back around midnight on unfamiliar 7th Avenue.

The image is still as clear as the porch light over a huddle of four or five prostitutes three steps above the street. They gave a chorus of come-ons, all except one, an astonishingly pretty young woman who looked tragically out of place. I kept walking south toward 52nd Street, stricken with a deep sense of wanting to rescue her, wanting simply to talk, to discover what tragedy led her to that frigid brownstone stoop, in a skirt like a fringe, in New York City, night after night. But fear, nurture, shame? . . . kept me from turning back and trying to help set her a new path. How, I might help, I had no idea. So I kept going as the age old banter of a price died away. I didn't stop. Jesus did. Nor would he have chosen the pretty one.

There wasn't anywhere Jesus would not go. There was no personal hell he would not enter to rake in its consequences from a world of sin, that in so doing we might have a way out, unencumbered; a way back home to the God who gives us life.

Amen.