

Hell?

Text: Isaiah 66:24; Luke 1:51-52

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not be quenched. Isaiah 66:24

...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. Luke 1:51-52

Let us descend into hell. Well, I mean, we've been to heaven. Now, "Hell?" I suppose if there is a heaven it is quite natural that one might raise a question about the other possibility. But what has the *Magnificat* to do with such a question? Well, it has everything to do with that question, I suppose, because in the beauty of voice and instrument, the *Magnificat* according to Pachelbel becomes an ethereal experience. But did you catch the words?

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.

That is a battle cry in the mouth of a young Hebrew maiden. That is a radical social statement, and if there is a hell it will be populated by the powerful and the rich and mighty who rule and oppress and abuse and who lack justice, righteousness, compassion and love. If God is angry, God is angry not with the ungodly who pay no heed, but with the godly who insulate themselves from the pain of the world. If Jesus was angry it was not with tax collectors and adulterers and garden-variety sinners. It was with the religious establishment that bound heavy burdens on the peoples' back and oppressed people in the name of God.

Is there a hell? "Yes, Virginia, there's a hell." It is the hell of missing the meaning and purpose of life, of having one's life end without realizing its full potential, a life of self regard and self assertion and self centeredness that fails to find the rhythm of God's movement, which is to realize the highest possibility for our human existence. If there is wrath in God and wrath in Jesus Christ, it is not for

the poor, the oppressed, the careless and the reckless; it is for the well-informed and the enlightened folks like us with power, position and prestige who go our own way while the world weeps and goes to hell.

“Hell?” Question mark because we are talking about things about which we have no experience, and about things beyond the veil we cannot penetrate in our present experience. But the question is always before us even though it doesn’t get mentioned in polite circles and is not a topic for conversation. Preached on almost never in the Church and yet the question of Hell is a kind of ghost that lurks around the edges. The doctrine of hell or of everlasting or eternal punishment has been the chief weapon of the Church for controlling people, scaring people, manipulating people. It probably has been the greatest travesty perpetrated in the name of God and goodness and decency. And yet you can’t take the Bible seriously without sensing that there is a kind of ultimacy about the issue of our life. At the very end of the Old Testament in Isaiah, a very late writing, there is a beginning of that imagery that we call apocalyptic. That genre of writing is classically expressed in the book of Revelation where you have all the images of fire, and smoke, and the moon darkened, and the sun darkened, and the heavens falling and that kind of thing. You have the very beginnings of that in that last chapter of Isaiah 66. Verse 24 of that chapter is a gruesome verse. Just prior to that verse all the nations are beginning to come to Jerusalem to worship before the Lord. It seems like there is a kind of universalistic theme here where the nations will finally come to worship at the temple. But then the 24th verse says, “And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” In the synagogue in the Jewish tradition when this lesson was read, the lecture could not end with that verse. The reader had to go back and read verse 23 because they didn’t want any lesson to end on that note. The picture was too gruesome.

In the passage that I read in the Gospel of Mark, I read it because it is full of hell, but the word *hell* is a translation of the Hebrew word for the *Valley of Hinnom*. The Valley of Hinnom was a valley just outside Jerusalem. To the south on the Mount of Olives as you look across the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem, you could also look south and you could see the Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom was the place where they burned the offal of the animals that were slaughtered for temple sacrifice. It was where they threw the bodies of criminals. The Valley of Hinnom was a public incinerator. It was a refuse heap. It was a garbage dump. But this is the imagery that Jesus picks up. Now the imagery is so strong and so lurid - the temple sacrifices created a rather rancid situation around the temple. There are one or two persons here in Christ Community that would like me eventually to come with one of those sensors, you know, with a little incense. Why not, we’ve got everything else? One of these days we are going to have a little incense. But the incense for us would simply be one more little pretty trifle in our worship, but in the temple days the incense had a function - it stank. It was to get rid of the odor.

When I was a boy, my father was superintendent of a company that had a subsidiary and once in a while he would have to go out and visit that company. Whenever I could, I would jump in the truck with him. I loved to ride in that truck. The subsidiary was the Kalamazoo Rendering Works. Have you ever been to a rendering works? You know what they do? They go around to farms and pick up dead animals and bring them in (Are you comfortable?) - they bring these dead animals in and slaughter them and take the skin and cure the skin and hides, and they grind up these things, you know, bones and all and make fertilizer. So one summer day, very hot, I went out with my father and walked into the slaughtering room and I lost it. It was bad! If you have ever been to a rendering works, you probably haven't returned.

There is another image I have – it's an image of a friend of mine down in Florida. I used to go down fishing with him, and you know if you are a fisherman one of the problems is to get rid of the fish heads and the other stuff. You can't put it in your garbage can because it begins to reek there. You really have to bury it. My Dad always buried it. The guy in Florida had dug a pit and he threw the entrails into that pit. I went out with him one time. He took the cover off and I'll tell you I just snapped back. It was white and it moved. (Laughter) There must have been one billion maggots just delightfully feasting.

One other image. I used to weed celery in Kalamazoo in the muck. (Laughter) In the muck in the summertime sometimes there is a kind of spontaneous combustion and the muck starts to smolder and sometimes those fires in those muck fields would go on all summer. And they smelled too! They just kept smoldering, kind of like a peat bog on fire.

The imagery of hell in the scripture is a combination of the Kalamazoo Rendering Works, that maggot pit, and the muck that burns forever. That is the picture. That is the image. Hell in Mark 12, as Jesus uses it, is a translation of the Valley of Hinnom, and the Valley of Hinnom became a symbol, an image, for life that ends up on the garbage heap. In the Old Testament, in apocalyptic thought, and in the ministry of the teachings of Jesus, it became the image that said to people, "Life is important and you are responsible for the way you live. You are responsible for the choices you make. And at the end of it all, as well as during the interim period, you are constantly being called into account. You are responsible for the way you live. You are responsible for the issue of your life. Your life is a gift and the way that you use it, and the choices that you make, the decisions, the priorities, the values, the things to which you give your heart and soul – those things will be reviewed with you, for you will stand in the presence of them and in the presence of God and there will be that moment of judgment."

What Jesus was getting at when he talked and used this kind of imagery was not the building of a systematic theological picture of eternal damnation or bliss as the case may be, but rather with saying to people here and now before him, "Watch. Take care. Live responsibly. You are called to righteousness and to

justice and compassion, and to love. You are called to care and to be careful, and so don't miss the meaning of life. Don't miss the purpose for which God created you. You can miss it. You can destroy yourself. You can destroy others." I believe with all my heart that judgment is woven into the biblical narrative from beginning to end, and I do not believe that any one of us, neither myself nor you, will ever get away with anything. What we sow we will also reap. That which we do and that which we speak, and that to which we commit our hearts, are those things to which we are held accountable. And there will be that moment of accounting. There will be a reckoning. Life is not simply to be willy nilly on its way, flouncing along nonchalantly, carelessly, as though it doesn't matter, as if it doesn't matter if one cares or not, if one decides for compassion or not, if one is selfish or self-aggrandizing or not.

All of these things matter. *Everything* matters. Life is serious! That is what Jesus conveyed. Life has implications. Decisions have consequences. Don't we really know that no one ultimately gets away with anything? I wouldn't want to live in a world where I could get away with something. Would you? Well, I wouldn't mind living in a world where *I* could get away with it, but I wouldn't want to live in a world where *you* could get away with it. (Laughter) I want to be sure that I live in a world that has a kind of moral fabric about it so that there is something or someone, or some structure of things that will make for ultimate justice - on the side of righteousness and compassion and love.

The *Magnificat* was a battle song on the lips of a young Hebrew maiden who said, "God is a God who sets what is wrong to right. God is a God who is on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the voiceless and the powerless. God cares. God cares about the human condition. And God has a bias for those who have no advocate." Jesus manifested the wrath of God against the powerful, the religious, the establishment, the entrenched - those who had a vested interest in the status quo. Jesus was radical, revolutionary and they crucified him because, if they didn't crucify him, they would have had to change. All of the prophets have been killed. And religion has been the instrument of their murder.

Jesus in the prophetic tradition was a destabilizer. But before long the religious institutions were able to get things back into the neat and tidy. Religion all too easily, again and again, becomes the baptizer of the status quo. It becomes the institutionalized form of oppression and abuse all too often. In the name of God it baptizes those structures of society that hold people down and gives advantage to those who are powerful - like us. Hell has been the best thing the churches had going. It has held people under threat. It has scared people to death. It has made people cower before a finger pointing to an angry and wrathful God.

But we have set the truth of God on its head. Life is serious. God holds us accountable. We are not going to get away with anything. But I need to preach about the doctrine of hell as it has been traditionally taught in the medieval church and the Protestant Reformation and in our own tradition. I need to

preach about that in order to undo the damage that has been done with that doctrine, a doctrine that has driven out of the Church too many thoughtful people. For it is not really believed by as many people as it would seem to be believed by. I have got to tell you that the biblical witness is very diverse. There is not a clear teaching on the ultimate destiny of all human kind. There was no formal creedal Church statement on eternal punishment until the 6th century. Some of the most illustrious names in the gallery of the Church did not believe in a hell in the traditional sense of a place of eternal torment, so the witness is divided. There have been various solutions that have been suggested. There is the traditional one that the righteous go to eternal life and the damned go to eternal torment. There is the opposite - the idea of a kind of universal restoration where God will finally be all in all. And then there is a view that is more popular presently and which seems to be growing in conservative circles that is called Annihilationism - a view that those who come to the grace of God will be issued into eternal bliss, and those that reject that grace will not be eternally tormented but simply come to extinction.

Well, what do you believe? What do you believe? You need not look to me for an answer because I, like you, struggle with these things and think about them, but I will tell you a couple of things that I believe, and I hope that it will help you as you think about the ultimate issue of your own life.

I will tell you one thing that I do not believe. I do not believe in a God of retribution. That God has been portrayed by the Church all too often, I think - the kind of God whose offended honor demands that God gets his own, a kind of punishment and reward, where God is all too human. I don't see God that way as God was revealed in Jesus. I don't believe God is an angry deity, offended at the dishonor of his dignity, waiting to mete out punishment.

Neither do I believe that the doctrine of hell as it has been taught in the Church has been a fair reflection of the biblical witness, but rather that it has been used as a control mechanism. I believe in the Church we have imposed guilt and threatened judgment as a means of control. Many Christian leaders have felt that, to be honest with the people and to take that away, would be to lose control, and that the common people need to be scared of hell in order to have the hell scared out of them.

I also believe that there has been a lot of desire for something like eternal punishment. Not that we would think that we might be candidates for it, but there are some others we know who have it coming. I'm serious. There is that kind of something in us that wants revenge and wants another to get their due. We hope that the bullies and the ones who have beat us and competed with us and conquered us and oppressed us, perhaps will get their due.

In the history of the Church and in the Old Testament there are some lurid pictures of the righteous rejoicing over the damnation of the wicked. I could quote you some vivid statements. The Church, religious people, have often been

the oppressed and the persecuted - the minority. Our biblical doctrines, our biblical documents and our creedal tradition come most often out of a people who are no people, and there was this kind of crying out for God to damn the persecutors. Tertullian, the great church father, said that "the righteous would be able to take joy and satisfaction in seeing the burning of the wicked who had oppressed them."

Those kinds of emotions, which are rampant in the history of our theological tradition in the Christian Church, those kinds of emotions are sub-Christian, less than Jesus taught. They are unworthy of the God reflected in Jesus, and they really have no place for us. If we perpetuate that kind of thinking, what we do is turn thoughtful people away. We trivialize the reality of life's accountability. And we fail to say instead to those within the Church and without, "Don't miss the meaning of life."

Probably the best image that I have ever found, that helps me in all of this is just a paragraph from C.S. Lewis. Rather than hell, he speaks of purgatory, a final cleansing justification:

Our souls demand purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, "It is true my son that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy." Should we not reply, "It was submission, Sir, and if there's no objection I would rather be cleansed first."

"It may hurt, you know?"

"Even so, Sir, I assume that the process of purification will normally involve suffering, partly from tradition, partly because most real good that has been done me in this life has involved it."

But I don't think suffering is the purpose of purgation. I can well believe that people neither much worse or much better than I will suffer less than I or more. No nonsense about merit. The treatment given will be the one required whether it hurts little or much. My favorite image on this matter comes from the dentist's chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am coming round a voice will say, 'Rinse your mouth out with this.' This will be purgatory."

I believe that one day I will be in the presence of the Lord. That at the moment of death there is an encounter with God, at which moment all is clear and all is revealed. I believe that encounter with God, a moment which reveals all, will be the moment of regret, remorse, repentance, and then adoration at a grace that says, "Nevertheless." Could one finally say, "No," to that grace? It would be presumptuous to answer I suppose. It is my hope and conviction that God's "Yes,"

will finally batter down my every “No,” and all the “No’s” of all those who are encountered finally by the living God.

Hell? I don’t know. Of grace - of that I am certain. Thank God!