

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 28, 2013

Maundy Thursday

I Peter 3:18-22

Creed 7

...He descended into Hell...

The story is a little out of order tonight. This day - Maundy Thursday - is intended to commemorate the last night before Jesus died, focusing on the Last Supper. Tomorrow - Good Friday - we remember Jesus' death; and Saturday - the "silent" day when nothing seems to be happening in the story - is when Jesus descended into Hell.

But since it would be a bit much to come to church 4 days in a row (though some do it!) we are collapsing Thu, Fri and Sat. into tonight. (Though tomorrow we will have an informal reading of Jesus' passion at 12:30 here in this room.) But I am glad to think with you even briefly tonight about Holy Saturday - which is easily overlooked even in the church.

Sometimes when we think about the almighty power of God, we try to pose a problem that seems to contradict God's power. The standard oldie is: "Is it possible for God to make a rock so heavy that even He can't lift it?" I don't think anyone has ever solved that one or that anyone needs to, as it's not very important.

A more important question to ask concerning God's power is this:

Is it possible for a person to reject God so completely that not even God can redeem them?

Is it possible that I can say NO so loudly and so emphatically that it trumps even God's YES?

Is it possible for me or you to live and act in such a way that, if we choose, we can completely remove ourselves from the sphere of God's love and go completely away from Him?

Is it possible that, if I want to, I can choose to go to the place where God is not, to go to Hell?

These are far more important questions than the one about the heavy rock. Can I say finally and completely and irrevocable NO to God and, therefore, consign myself to Hell?

So what about hell? In our modern world there seem to be two opposing views of hell.

The first is - There is no hell.

God is love and Jesus is nice, and how could a loving God create us and then put us forever and ever in a place of torment? It doesn't seem fair. It also doesn't seem to square with our view of God as the loving Father of the prodigal son, or of Jesus the Good Shepherd who hunts for the lost sheep. Would a God like that really send people to hell? The only conclusion can be that there is no hell.

And the other view is just the opposite:

There is a hell, and so you'd better shape up or you're going there.

And there are plenty of people who are enthusiastically in favor of hell and can even name a few people whom they are sure are already there, and others whom they know are headed there! A Gallup Poll (2004) found that 92% of regular churchgoers believe in hell. I know people whose faith is strengthened by knowing that others (and it's always "others") are going to hell.

So what about the Bible? Well the Bible is clear - hell exists. Jesus himself speaks of it in his parables where people are being cast into the outer darkness, where there is wailing and weeping and the gnashing of teeth. He speaks of Gehenna, the place of torment.

There is a cartoon in the New Yorker that shows a line of condemned people standing at the entrance to hell, being prodded down into the flames by a devil with a pitchfork. One of those in line says to another, "I hate this part."

I met someone once who had had a near-death experience; but not the ones you typically hear about, with the white light and the peaceful tug forward. No, this man saw hell. And as wonderful as the people who see the white light - he described the terror of its opposite. And it changed his life, because he was NOT going there!

Well, the Bible hates it too, and yet does not hesitate to affirm its existence. And a faith grounded in the Bible needs to include hell as well.

But we can't stop there - we need to ask the NEXT question, which is - So what are we to believe about hell? And here the Bible can help us, affirming one thing that changes everything - Jesus has been there!

The church has traditionally called this "the harrowing of hell."

The word harrow is helpful here, but not one we use in our everyday speech - unless you're a farmer. It is an agricultural term - it is the piece of equipment that gets dragged over plowed land to level it, break up dirt clods and root up weeds. And when used as a verb it means to distress, to disturb, to violate.

And that's what Jesus does in hell. He torments the place of torment. He invades the Devil's den. And because Jesus is so completely opposite - life and light and goodness and love - his presence there is a violation of evil itself.

The Bible says it like this: "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:39) Jesus goes to hell to proclaim the gospel to those who imagined they were beyond hope, to those who lived at a time and place apart from him and, therefore, couldn't know him.

If this strange passage in I Peter is to be believed, there is no one consigned to hell who is absolutely lost - not Judas, nor Pilate, not Hitler, or Stalin or Milosevic - not even you or me.

Hell is often defined as complete separation from God - the place where God is not. So now we have the conundrum of even THAT place being invaded by Jesus (who is God!). But remember what Jesus said when he was hanging on the cross - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The place where God is not - Jesus forsaken by God. He has been abandoned by God so that we never have to be. Again... Jesus was abandoned by God so that we will never be.

Because Jesus went THERE - descended into the deadly darkness, confronting the enemy on his own turf - WE HAVE HOPE!

Because Jesus went THERE - we know that nothing - no darkness, loneliness, or pain we experience, is unreachable from his gracious presence.

Hell is dark, bereft, and void.

But the Good News is that on Saturday, hell is being harrowed, emptied by the word and work of a relentlessly seeking savior who will not leave us be.

He told us stories of the seeking Shepherd who forever seeks the one lost sheep, the faithful father who awaits the return of the one lost son, the relentless woman who does not rest until she finds the one coin. (Luke 14) And he meant what he said.

There is no place where you can languish, no darkness so dark, which places you beyond his seeking, searching, reach. He is willing to go all the way to Hell to bring his harvest home.

Hell is real - but perhaps, Hell is empty!

Let this "ultimate" Good News carry you through these three days when we contemplate the darkness of Jesus' death.

As we prepare to receive communion, we'll hear Gianna sing a piece that Bernard wrote. The text is Jonah chapter 2 from the Old Testament story of Jonah and the Whale. Chapter two is the prayer Jonah prays when he is in the belly of the big fish.

Here's what comes before he ends up there - listen for the similarities between Jonah and Jesus:

Jonah has been asked by God to go to Tarshish to preach against their "wicked ways." Instead he turns and runs away - far away - in fact, he gets on a ship headed in the other direction. God, being God, cannot be fooled and the dire consequences begin. There is a terrible storm and everyone on the ship is at risk. Jonah knows it's his fault and offers himself to be thrown over into the sea to save the men on board. Once in the sea the storm stops and...." The Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights..."

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

‘I called to the Lord out of my distress,

and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,

and you heard my voice.

You cast me into the deep,

into the heart of the seas,

and the flood surrounded me;

all your waves and your billows

passed over me.

Then I said, “I am driven away

from your sight;

how shall I look again

upon your holy temple?”

The waters closed in over me;

the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped around my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O Lord my God.
As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!’

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land...