

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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What Does Hell Have to Do With Salvation?

Matthew 27:45-54

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From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Before we get too far into this sermon and I say the word “hell” more times than you’re used to hearing from the pulpit on a Sunday morning, it seems important – or at least helpful – to start with an acknowledgement of our conflicted relationship with the word “hell.” We teach our children that hell is a bad word, we say H-E-double hockey sticks to avoid saying it in front of our children, and then we come to worship on Sunday mornings and say “hell” out loud together almost every week in the Apostles’ Creed. You see how this could be confusing.

Natalie Raygor, our Assistant Director of Youth Ministries, shared a story with me earlier this week from when she was about eight years old. It was after worship one Sunday at her home church, and her parents and the pastor were having a conversation in the back of the sanctuary. She had wandered away from them and made her way up to the pulpit and was pretending to lead worship. (Some of you know that Natalie’s in seminary now, so maybe this was an early clue that she would be called to ministry.) A piece of paper with the Apostles’ Creed printed on it was taped to the pulpit, and she started to lead an imaginary congregation in reciting the Apostles’ Creed. Natalie got to the part about Jesus and read, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into **BEEP** and on the third day he rose again from the dead.”

Through their laughter, Natalie’s parents and pastor assured her it was okay for her to say hell when she saying the Apostles’ Creed. No need to bleep out hell there.

It does seem odd, though doesn't it, that something that we usually consider bad is perfectly acceptable at church? Not the way we think things usually work.

We have a complex relationship with the word "hell." It's a word we use for a variety of reasons and to express a variety of emotions – some of which may be expressed during the Panthers game later today. If our use of the word "hell" is complicated, then our understanding of the theology around hell is that much more complicated. As I've spent time thinking about hell and what it means for us as people of faith, it's become clear to me how unclear we are on what we believe about hell.

Our question for this week is "What does hell have to do with salvation?" All questions about salvation are important, but for some people and some Christian denominations, this is THE question. They might phrase it differently, but for many Christians the question of where you will be in the afterlife is what Christianity is all about. Will you spend eternity in heaven or in hell burning in a lake of fire?

After this weekend's snow and ice, a lake of fire doesn't sound so bad to me, but I digress...

What does hell have to do with salvation?

The short answer, according to the Bible, is nothing. Hell has nothing to do with salvation. When the Bible talks about salvation, it rarely makes a connection between salvation and the afterlife.

For as much attention as hell gets in some Christian circles, the Bible doesn't actually talk about hell that much. The actual word shows up fewer than **60 times in the entirety of Scripture**, and Scripture is inconsistent in its description of what hell is like. Sometimes it's described as darkness, other times it's a prison; other times hell is separation from God. What does stay the same throughout the Bible is that hell is not talked about as part of God's framework for salvation.

As you've probably picked up on by now – the fourth week in our sermon series on salvation – the Bible does talk about salvation a lot, and it consistently describes salvation through stories of people whose lives are transformed in the here and now.

Think about the Israelites whom God saves from living under Pharaoh's oppressive rule. They are delivered from life in an exploitative system and freed to live as a community where people are treated with dignity and power is shared.

Think about Zacchaeus whom we read about a few weeks ago. Jesus invites himself over to the tax collector's home, and Zacchaeus blurts out – almost in spite of himself – that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four times what he had cheated people.

Over and over again, Scripture shows us that salvation isn't something we earn and it isn't about what happens to us when we die. It's something that God offers us today, so that we might live differently today simply because God loves us.

Still there is something compelling about the concept of hell as punishment. There must be - otherwise it wouldn't be so satisfying to tell people who offend us to go there or to describe certain unpleasant experiences like going to the DMV or the dentist as a living hell.

There's something in us that wants – maybe even needs – there to be a divine merit system at work in the world. We want to know that, for better or for worse, what we do matters. Maybe it's a reflection of our American way of being in the world that we expect God to act as we would – doling out rewards for good behavior and punishing those who misbehave or don't live up to our standards.

Hell, as it's commonly conceived of, can give us a strange sense of comfort in that it provides assurance that there are consequences for our actions. (Of course, this is infinitely more appealing when someone else has wronged us and we're in control; it quickly becomes less desirable when we're the ones who deserve punishment.)

But all of those beliefs about hell come from a human perspective; they have to do with how *we* want life to play out, how *we* think it should go, and they reveal more about how *we* tend to be in relationship with each other than how God has chosen to be in relationship with us.

Writer Kathleen Norris observes that the concept of hell being a form of punishment for sinners didn't show up in the Hebrew scriptures or the Old Testament until after Israel had experienced the trauma of exile in Babylon. You may remember that the exile was a defining experience in the life of Israel. After the exodus, when God

saved the people from Pharaoh's rule, God led the Israelites to the promised land. It took them a long time to get there and acquiring the promised land wasn't easy. So when the promised land was conquered by the Babylonians in the 7th century BCE, and all of the Israelites were displaced from their homes and the land that had been promised to them by God and exiled to Babylon, it was devastating. You can imagine how desperately the Israelites would've hoped that God would punish the Babylonians.

"Before that [exile]," Norris writes, "the word 'sheol' had conveyed the general abode of all the dead, as did images of the abyss or the pit. This tells me that how human beings treat each other has everything to do with our concept of hell."

History is full of examples of people who have subjected other people to conditions that we might consider hell:

Concentration camps during the Holocaust in WWII

Slavery in 19th century America

Jim Crow laws in 20th century America

It would be nice to think that that's all in the past, that people are kinder to each other now, but one 30 minute local news show is enough to remind us that there is still a lot of violence and suffering in our world.

I wish we could say that we aren't also guilty of participating in systems that benefit from keeping people in hell-ish conditions, but the truth is that we are.

Maybe it's Norris' insight – that our belief about hell tells us something about how we are capable of treating each another – that can help us begin to answer another big question: **Why did Jesus go to hell?**

This question comes up every year in Confirmation class. The eighth graders learn about the Apostles' Creed, and the confirmands' mentors – adult members of the church – are always invited to this lesson about the creed that Christians have been saying together for over two thousand years and includes the statement: Jesus descended into hell. The question that the eighth graders always ask and that their mentors always struggle to answer is why? Why did Jesus go to hell?

It's a reasonable question, and there's no easy answer to it. In much the same way that God's freely given grace and salvation defy our logic, the idea that Jesus goes to hell doesn't make sense to us either.

As God incarnate, Jesus certainly didn't have to go to hell, but Jesus did anyway. God chose to come to us in human form, to experience all that we experience.

The passage we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is one we usually don't read until Holy Week. It's the standard reading for Good Friday, the Friday before Easter Sunday, the day we believe that Jesus was nailed to the cross. The only reason we call it Good Friday is because we know what happened on the following Sunday. It wasn't Good to begin with.

By the time we get to this moment when Jesus is hanging on a cross and the sky has gone black in the middle of the day, Jesus has already been betrayed by his one of his closest friends, arrested on false charges, accused of blaspheming and claiming to be the King of the Jews. He's been betrayed again when Peter denies knowing him, the soldiers have stripped him, forced a crown of thorns on his head, beat him, and mocked him.

And then there is the actual crucifixion. Death by crucifixion is especially gruesome. There was no attempt to minimize the pain or to ease the person's suffering. The suffering was the point, which sounds a lot like some of our beliefs about hell – suffering is the point, right?

To say that Jesus descended into hell is to affirm that there is no depth of suffering that God refuses to experience with us.

If anything – that's what hell has to do with salvation. It's not about punishment. It's not about fear. It's not about where we go when we die. It's that God knows through Jesus' human experience just how just intense suffering can be, how difficult life can be, and has been there before us. God is willing to go to the deepest places of physical and emotional pain with us and has saved us so that we don't have to stay in those places.

Honestly, I wish that were the focus of more Christian conversations about hell. It's not hard to use hell as a scare tactic to motivate people to live a particular way. It's a

different thing entirely to talk about how God suffered as we suffered. It's a different thing to offer people who are in the midst of deep pain the assurance of knowing that God is there with them and we know that because God in Jesus has been there before. That is what salvation is about – being honest about the real suffering in our world and in our lives and that receiving the gift given to us in Jesus Christ that it doesn't always have to be that way. Thanks be to God. Amen.