

“What about Hell?” / Mark 9:38-50 / 30 September 2012

“If your hand causes you to go astray,” Jesus says, “cut it off. It’s better to enter into life maimed than to have two good hands and end up in hell. And if your foot causes you to go astray, cut it off. It’s better to enter into life lame than to go to hell with two good feet. And if your eye causes you to go astray, tear it out! Better to enter the kingdom of God one-eyed than, with your two good eyes, to be thrown into a place where their worm never dies, and their fire is not quenched.” Yowza! What...what can I possibly say about...this?

Some years ago, we lived in a county in Northern Pennsylvania where there were four Presbyterian churches and only two Presbyterian pastors. In terms of geography, that county was actually bigger than Allegheny County—which has 150 Presbyterian churches and many more pastors than churches. Here at Bower Hill Church alone, we are fortunate to have five ordained ministers—people other than myself—who attend our worship and volunteer their services freely. I’ve got more backup coverage than the pope. But up north, it was difficult to find someone to cover for me whenever I went away on vacation. I didn’t like to entrust the pulpit to just anyone, but options were few. The church could pay a minister to drive 95 twisting miles from Erie, but then they would have to pay mileage, too. Fortunately, there was in that congregation someone who had completed training as a “lay pastor.” And so, whenever I went away, I usually asked our resident lay pastor to cover for me. This worked fairly well for about two years, until I came home from vacation one day and found that somebody had placed a copy of the lay pastor’s sermon on my desk. Somebody wanted me to know what had been preached in my absence. The sermon was entitled “Are You Going to Hell?” And the driving question of the sermon was whether the hearers would end up spending eternity in the blissful rest of heaven or in the endless torments of hell. I was aware that the lay pastor found my preaching indirect and overly sophisticated. But I never expected that lay pastor to deliver a fiery jeremiad about the afflictions of eternal damnation. Needless to say, finding replacement coverage for my vacations got a little bit harder after that day.

Over the years, I’ve built my career as a preacher on a few basic rules: You never start a sermon by telling people how Webster defines a word. “The 1961 edition of the Webster Merriam Dictionary defines autonomy as...” You never do that. Some of my other rules might seem pretty obvious, but it took me a while to figure them out: Don’t make your wife the butt of your jokes; it makes people uncomfortable, and it makes for a potentially awkward drive home. Where faith and politics intersect, avoid being too specific about politics. Don’t assume that people care what the text says in the original Greek. Never make fun of beehive hairdos, or poodle skirts, or the fashions of another generation. Don’t critique a former pastor, no matter how unpopular. Don’t pretend to explain things you don’t actually understand, because someone out there just might call you on it. Never preach anything that you don’t actually believe. When you condemn unethical business practices, never mention Wal-Mart by name. Lay off the Pittsburgh Pirates, however sorely you are tempted. But my cardinal rule for preaching is never to name a sermon “Are You Going to Hell”? In fact, I’ve made a career of avoiding the topic of hell completely. But my sermon last week emphasized the need to ask tough questions of our faith. And the lectionary—our weekly calendar of Bible readings—gave us this hard, hard passage to read from the Book of Mark this week. And so, I’m left with little recourse other than to ask the tough question, “What about hell?”

Once again, we're following Jesus on his teaching tour of Galilee, his native province. As we said last week, Jesus' ministry was in large part a call for justice, for in his time and place justice belonged to those who could afford it. History has repeated this scenario time and again. In fact, we are seeing a large push in this country to secure superior rights for the wealthy. But that is the topic of another sermon. Into his own days of hardship and despair, Jesus cried out for justice. But let's think about "justice."

In 2006, a Utah court sentenced Weldon Angelos to fifty-five years in prison for possessing \$350 worth of marijuana. The sentence was, essentially, life without parole, a stiffer penalty than some murderers receive. If the punishment is unequal to the crime, like cutting off a thief's hand, or stoning an adulterer, then it actually harms the good name and credibility of the court. And that's why you and I choke on this age-old language about...hell. Jesus is the Justice Guy, but where is the justice in never-ending punishment? Couldn't even Pol Pot and Idi Amin eventually hope to pay off their debts to society, perhaps after a few millennia of hard labor? Besides, can it be called "justice" if it's merely revenge for the misdeeds of a tortured soul; shouldn't justice work for the restoration of the guilty party? Punishment must be equal to—not greater than—the crime; otherwise the punishment itself is an injustice. And so, I ask you again, what about this place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched?

A firebrand of an old-time preacher once decided to put the fear of the Lord into his congregation. At the beginning of his sermon, he placed an earthworm into a jar full of hard alcohol. He placed another worm into a jar full of chocolate syrup. A third worm he placed into a jar of tobacco. At the end of the sermon, he held up the jar full of alcohol and said, "Now, this worm is dead!" Then he held up the jar of chocolate syrup and said, "This one is dead, too." Finally, he held up the jar full of tobacco and observed, "Well, this worm is also dead." He then asked his congregation, "What lesson do you gather from these three dead worms?" A little boy at the back shouted, "If you drink a lot, smoke a lot, and eat a lot, you'll never have worms!" I must admit that Jesus does talk about a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. We'll get to that in just a minute. But for now, think about the ways that you've seen the afterlife depicted in art, and film, and literature. Unfortunately, our popular imagination of hell comes from the same medieval theologians who gave us thumbscrews and the crusades. Even stranger is the fact that Dante's *Inferno*, an old Italian political satire, has done more to shape our current idea of hell than anything on the lips of Jesus. We've all seen the tortured paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and William Blake, where people are chewed on by devils. My generation gets its idea of hell from the old Warner Brothers cartoons. Sylvester the Cat made occasional appearances in the fiery underworld for his treatment of Tweety Bird.

And it's with these cartoon images that people walk through life. And it's these cartoon images that haunt some people as they draw near to death. What was Jesus doing, what did he mean, when he broached the terrible topic of hell? Well, to start with, remember that for Jesus, the kingdom of God and "entering into life" are not necessarily future events. His whole point when he put down the saw and hammer and took up the preaching task was to proclaim that the time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God is at hand. And so when he talks about "entering into life maimed" or "going to hell with two good hands," he's not necessarily talking about some distant afterlife. He's talking as much

about choosing between a meaningful, fulfilling life of service in the here and now as opposed to choosing a wasted life of purposelessness and misdirection...here and now.

Long ago—in Jesus’ days and earlier—there was a sinister valley just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It was a shadowy, narrow gully where, in centuries past, the Canaanite peoples who originally built the city had once sacrificed children, by fire, to their dark gods, Moloch and Baal. Because of the history of the place, when the Hebrew people took the city, they couldn’t bring themselves to use the valley for anything but a garbage dump. This was in the days long before landfills and recycling centers. And so, there were often fires burning there, to reduce the trash heaps. The place was home to bands of feral dogs, rats, birds of prey. It was a place of ruination where discarded things were left, a valley of fire and acrid smoke, a place where no one would ever linger. This valley was called “Gehenna.” You’ve probably heard this before, but “Gehenna” is the word that Jesus uses for “hell.” I’m told that nowadays, if you go to Jerusalem (which I have never done), you’ll find picnic tables and paved trails in Gehenna. One Baptist minister carries a picture of modern day Gehenna in his wallet to show to people who ask him about hell. It’s a greenish valley with olive trees and nice views of the old city walls.

Jesus’ “hell” is not eternal punishment, but rather “Gehenna,” and he’s speaking in analogies. He’s basically saying, “You have a choice. You can ‘enter into life’ by investing your energies and resources in things that matter, or you can throw your life away, toss it onto the garbage heap, let it rot in Gehenna with all the useless and unwanted things.” I must admit, this too can sound kind of harsh. But ending up in life’s garbage dump is far preferable to the eternal torment described by some religious people today. And in fact, the way Jesus tells it, ending up in Gehenna isn’t even something that a vengeful God does to a person; it’s something that people—in part—do to themselves by way of their poor decisions.

Two boys were walking home from church one day, after hearing a harrowing sermon about hell and the devil. One boy said to the other, “What do you think of all this talk about the devil?” The second boy answered, “Well, you know how the Tooth Fairy turned out. It’s probably just your mom.” I’m not trying to dismiss the venerable old doctrine of hell. I know that some people take great comfort in the idea of a hell. And I’m not saying that guilt isn’t punished. Guilt is real. But I think most guilt carries its own punishment right within itself, and it doesn’t wait for the afterlife to wreak havoc on our lives. Guilt is real. It can clog our mental and emotional systems, bringing us to a place of paralysis. Hell, if you will. But forgiveness is as real as guilt. That’s why I am sometimes deeply moved when I hear my own voice declaring, week after week, “Friends, hear and believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: in him we are forgiven.” What I am saying is that it’s silly and selfish to worry about eternal punishment when there is so much hell right here in this world.

The real tragedy of hell is that so many people spend this life trying to avoid it in the next life, all the while overlooking its presence all around us. There are hells on this earth that no one deserves. Very often we assign places in hell to people who’ve already been there, people whose actions spring from their experience hell. They’ve been living there for years; that’s why they act the way they act, speak the way they speak, do the things they do. Where is hell? Wherever human life is wasted and cast aside like refuse. It’s in the same old place where it always was. Hell is Fallujah in 2006, and all the war-torn places that ever were. Hell is a home where addiction reigns. Hell is a heart where

anger or sadness crowds out the love. Hell can be found in a squalid apartment above a vacant store on East Ohio Street. But it can also be found in our own comfortable zip codes. In fine brick and stone houses, behind their manicured front lawns, hell can be found in any place where we throw away our potential and live for lies, live for things other than the good dreams for which we were created. Hell is here and now.

But don't worry, that long-awaited kingdom of justice and peace is right here, too. It's forever coming and never quite come. It breaks out all around us here and there, now and then, wherever justice is served, wherever you love someone who will never love you back; wherever you give to someone who would never give to you; wherever you forgive someone who doesn't even care. That kingdom comes where the lonely are welcomed, the unlovely are loved, and the seemingly valueless are valued. That kingdom comes in great joy, and laughter, and tears. It comes today in the decisions you make. And so, if your hand causes you to go astray, to make death-dealing decisions—to choose the things that deny the life in yourself and in others—then cut that hand off. It's better to enter into life maimed. It's always better to enter into the ways of life, here and now, and in the world to come. And moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour, it's your choice. Amen.