

Sermon – 8/13/17
“People’s Choice: Where Did Satan Go?”
Mark 9:42-48 and 1 Peter 5:6-11
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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There is a story of a man who had had too much to drink one night. He stumbled to the bus station and got on the bus that he thought would take him home. As he staggered up the aisle he caught the eye of an elderly woman and so he sat down next to her. She glanced over at the man with disgust on her face. She looked him up and down and finally with judgment bubbling up within her she opened her mouth to speak.

"I've got news for you, young man. You're going straight to hell!"

And with that - the man jumped up out of his seat and running up the aisle shouted, "Wait a minute. I'm on the wrong bus!"ⁱ

The stories of hell and of Satan in Christian doctrine have all come from a similar place, not so much of judgment, but of warning. Those with mostly good intentions have spoken of such things as a means to warn others about how they were, in a sense, on the wrong bus in life. Their lives were headed in the wrong direction. Think ACDC's "Highway to Hell". Their life choices were taking them farther and farther away from a life that was, at least in the view of some, lived according to God's will.

In the history of the church, however, such warnings became judgment, and such judgement became condemnation. People began to twist scripture to suit their own interests and used it as a weapon to control others. People might have said things like "If you do this you are going straight to hell!" or "Such and such is of the devil!" Whole groups of people were said to be deserving of God's wrath. And while the original intent may have been to warn and to protect, such language has often led to

manipulation and condemnation. People have taken the place of God in the judgement seat and tried to decide for themselves who is in and who is out of God's good graces.

Many preachers from our own tradition – that is the Reformed Tradition – (think Jonathon Edwards and his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God) – have spoken of hell and Satan as a way to express their understanding of the wrath of God. They were able to describe the anguish of hell in such graphic detail that you might wonder if they had even been there themselves.

Listen to this one excerpt from Edwards. “Imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, all of a glowing heat, or into the midst of a glowing brick-kiln, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter of an hour, full of fire, as full within and without as a bright coal of fire, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! And how much greater... if you knew you must endure it for a whole year...or for a thousand years! O then, how would your heart sink... if you knew, that you must bear it forever and ever! That after millions of millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, than ever it was; and that you never, never should be delivered! (Jonathan Edwards, cited by A. W. Pink, *Eternal Punishment* [Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, n.d.], cited by Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 417.)ⁱⁱ

This is what many envision the unquenchable fires of hell to be like. And speaking of such things has, throughout the church's history, served as a way to manipulate people to change their way of life. Preachers have preached such things as a way to, pardon the expression, “scare the hell out of people.”

Gary Larson, author of *The Far Side Cartoons* comically illustrated the hopelessness of such an image when he showed a scene of someone arriving in hell with the choice of two doors being offered to them by Satan himself. On more door was written “Damned if you do.” And on the other door was written “Damned if you don’t.” In other words – once you are there – there is no hope.

Larson, in another comic strip, imagines hell being like the Devil leading a never ending exercise class. “Three more. Two more. One more. Ok 5 million leg lifts. Right leg first. Ready. Set.”

I remember as a child when I first started to think about the Devil and about Hell. It was after watching the movie *The Omen*. Why my parents ever let me watch that movie I’ll never know. Or maybe they didn’t let me...I can’t remember. What I do remember is that it gave me bad dreams! That story is just one example of a whole genre that describes the culture’s fascination with the classic battle between good and evil. The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien, The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis, The Star Wars series by George Lucas, The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling and the list goes on and on. And that doesn’t even begin to touch the industry of Books, TV Shows, and Movies that dive into the dark underworld of evil and it’s manifestation in the demonic forces that seek to hurt and destroy humanity. Yes – it is true that much of this comes from the creative imagination of writers simply trying to tell a good story. Some have begun to wonder whether that is all the Bible is. Just a good story about good vs. evil that is more symbolic than real and true.

One answer to the question about why some people have stopped talking about such things is simply because people don’t believe them anymore. Perhaps we’ve become too clever. Too sophisticated. Some people might think – “The idea of hell is just a scary ghost story to manipulate people into believing.” “The demon possession

we read about in the Bible is just different types of illness – mental and otherwise – that they didn't have names for back then.” “The Devil is simply a symbolic figure to explain the problem of human sin and of evil in the world.”

I remember years ago hearing a song by Christian musician Keith Green entitled “No One Believes in Me Anymore.” It is subtitled “Satan’s Boast.” In the song Satan sings about how easy his work has become because people don’t see him coming - He sings:

“I used to have to sneak around
But now they just open their doors
You know, no ones watching for my tricks
Because no one believes in me anymore.”ⁱⁱⁱ

C.S. Lewis once wrote a series of fictitious letters that he later published into the book The Screwtape Letters. These letters were written by a senior devil named Screwtape to his nephew, a junior devil named Wormwood. The purpose of the letters was to teach the younger devil how to master the art of temptation through lies, deception, and accusation. In the preface to the book Lewis wrote, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an unhealthy interest in them.”^{iv} Last night I went to see the Community Players production of *The Crucible*. That play tells the story of a community with an unhealthy interest in devils and the sad consequences of such an obsession. Lewis says that not believing at all can have equally sad consequences.

Another reason we may have stopped talking about such things is because some feel like our focus on Satan and hell just isn't P.C. It is uncomfortable and it just doesn't seem Politically Correct to go around condemning people to hell. We don't

want to be that person on the street corner with the sign that reads “Turn or Burn!” We don’t want to be that one who confronts someone and asks them if they want to accept Jesus as a way to avoid the fires of hell – like he was some kind of Fire Insurance Policy. After all – a policy is just something that you put in a desk drawer and hope you never need. On the other hand, a relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ is about a new way of life. It is about walking with the Lord and learning his ways. It is about an abundant life based on love and grace and hope and joy and peace. There doesn’t seem to be any of that in the angry rhetoric of judgment and condemnation.

But if you are into that kind of thing – I am sure you don’t have to go too far to find it. I am sure there are places that preach hellfire and brimstone, as they say. But you probably won’t find that here. You will hopefully find honest conversation about the subject when it comes up in the text of scripture for any given Sunday. And you will also find that you are given a choice between two ways of being in the world. A choice between life and death. A choice between worship of God and worship of self. A choice of a life that is about “seeking first the Kingdom of God” or a choice of life that is about seeking your own self-interest. The choice is there because God has given it to us. And we find that throughout the pages of scripture. We believe the scriptures to be the inspired Word of God and the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God’s Word to us as to how we should live and conduct ourselves. The warnings are clear in scripture and so we take them seriously.

There is a great scene from the comedy “Planes, Trains, and Automobiles” where the characters of Steve Martin and John Candy are driving late at night and they miss the sign about an on ramp to an interstate and end up driving in the wrong direction. Two tractor-trailer trucks are barreling down the road and they don’t see them coming. Someone on the other side of the road sees them and rolls their window down to warn them that they are going the wrong way but they don’t listen. In the end they barely

squeeze through the two trucks – sparks and metal flying everywhere – with visions of Satan laughing at them and their lives passing before their eyes. They come within an inch of death as is evidenced by the holes in the dash board from where their fingers have dug into the plastic.

The scriptures do warn us from going the wrong way – about how we are to live as God’s people. From the very first pages of scripture we encounter a choice that the first humans had. Do we believe what God has said to us or do we listen to what the serpent has to say? Even though the word Satan or Devil is never mentioned in the text, people throughout the history of the Christian faith have thought of that serpent in the Garden of Eden as being the Devil. Why? Because in the New Testament Satan is called the tempter, the deceiver, the adversary. He is the Father of Lies. We read in the gospels about Jesus’ being tempted in the wilderness after his baptism. We read about the devil’s flaming arrows in the letter to the Ephesians. We read about the Devil prowling around like a lion ready to devour in 1 Peter. But the Devil, in Christian theology, is not God’s equal. Almighty God is sovereign over all things. Even though evil will lie and tempt and try to pervert and twist the good creation of God – God’s will and purpose ultimately prevail.

We find the word Satan used very little in the Old Testament. It is used in a handful of places to describe both a human and divine adversary. In Job, Satan is part of the heavenly court that brings an accusation before God saying that Job was only faithful because of God’s blessing. And while the story of Job isn’t really about Satan, we do discover a common theme in scripture which is that Satan cannot ultimately do anything that God does not allow.

Some see a reference to Satan as a fallen angel in Isaiah 14 where the prophet announces the downfall of the King of Babylon. “How you are fallen from heaven, O

Day Star, son of Dawn!” The prophet wrote about how the King had tried to place himself on God’s throne in the minds of the people. The Latin translation of *Day Star* or “morning star” is where we get the name “Lucifer” which has become a popular name for Satan.

There really isn’t a doctrine of hell in the Old Testament – in terms of a place of fire and torment. We read about Sheol, Hades, and The Pit as the place of the dead. Sheol literally means – the unseen place.

Many theologians think that a theology of Satan and Hell developed more fully during the intertestamental period. As Jewish theology mixed with Canaanite and Greek mythology, what emerged was a being with great power who was known as the ruler of this age, who had a host of demons at his disposal, and who reigned in a fiery underground fortress of unquenchable fire.

When Jesus spoke of hell in our passage from Mark, he used the word Gehenna – which was also known as the Valley of Hinnom. This valley – just to the southwest of Jerusalem - is mentioned several times in the Old Testament as a place where child sacrifice was made to the god Molech. Molech was a Canaanite underworld god that, according to Isaiah 57, dwelled in Sheol. Interestingly – the Hebrew word for King is *Melech*. You can see how ideas could develop that Molech could be turned into a powerful being of the underworld. Anyway - Gehenna was a detestable place with a bad history. Some say it later became a garbage dump, that even dead bodies were dumped there, and that it smoldered with burning refuse night and day.

Theologian N.T. Wright suggests that “Gehenna became a metaphor for the fate, after death, of those who reject God’s way. Jesus was continually warning his contemporaries that unless they followed his way of the Kingdom, his way of peace, they, together with the nation and its capital city, were heading for literal and physical

destruction in a great cataclysm that would reduce Jerusalem to a large-scale and horrifying extension of its own smoldering rubbish heap.”^v

The other word translated “Hell” in the New Testament is “Tartaros.” This is mentioned both in 2 Peter and in Jude. Tartaros is a deep dark abyss written about in Greek Mythology where the wicked would receive divine punishment after their death.

This is likely the image that many have in their minds when they think of a place called Hell. In more recent times – some have abandoned the idea of a fiery eternal punishment – believing that a God of grace and love would not punish someone eternally for sin they had committed in this earthly life – no matter how bad that sin was. God, they say, being both just and loving, at the very most would give a more merciful punishment.

Others believe that God’s desire to save all people as is indicated in many passages of scripture, will result in God’s eternal patience with even those who would resist God’s grace. God will wait, in other words, until people come around, and accept the gift of grace that has been offered. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ – the incarnate Word of God - was offered for the sake of the whole world and God will not rest until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Frederick Buechner wrote the following about hell. “Dante saw written over the gates of hell the words ‘Abandon all hope ye who enter here,’ but he must have seen wrong. If there is suffering life in hell, there must also be hope in hell, because where there is life there is the Lord and giver of life; and where there is suffering he is there too, because the suffering of the ones he loves is also his suffering.”^{vi}

We read a similar sentiment in Psalm 139 – which was used in our call to worship – Where can I flee from your Spirit, O Lord. If I go up to the heavens you are there. If I descend to the place of the dead, you are also there.

Still – some think of Hell as that place where God is not. Hell is to Heaven as Evil is to Good. If heaven is that place where we are in the presence of God and experience God’s goodness – then hell is that place where we feel far removed from God’s presence and goodness. Some suggest hell – then – is a state of mind – or perhaps a state of the spirit - something we can experience here and now – just as heaven – or the Kingdom of God is something we can experience here and now.

Many are happy to leave all of this end of life judgement to God. It is not our job to condemn but only to love. Love God and love neighbor the commandments declare. And so it should be. But it would be a mistake to close our eyes to evil that is in our world. Whether we use terms like Hell or Satan does not excuse us from the evils of the holocaust or the nuclear arms race. It does not excuse us from the genocide of Rwanda or the terrorist acts of Al Qaeda, or Boko Haram, or ISIS. It does not excuse us from the poverty and famine in Sudan or the Syrian Refugee Crisis. It does not excuse us from the actions of supremacist groups or from racism or from oppression of any kind. It does not excuse us from homelessness and human trafficking. It does not excuse us from materialism, or self-indulgent behavior, or addiction or abuse. It does not excuse us from the hurt and pain that we cause others with our words or our actions or the hardened hearts that keep us from forgiveness.

Theologian Shirley Guthrie in his classic book Christian Doctrine wrote about how we cannot get away from the problem of evil in our world. “Evil is more than sin.” He wrote. “When we sin, we come under the spell of a power greater than ourselves and our ability to resist, a power from which we cannot free ourselves no matter how hard

we try. We do evil, but when we do we are trapped and controlled by evil. It dwells in us yet somehow has an existence of its own outside us.”^{vii}

Whether one calls this evil power Satan or not isn't the point. The point is, as 1 Peter tells us, that we resist it. And the only way to do that, according to this scripture, is to humble yourself under God's mighty hand. As soon as we think that we don't need God's help, or God's guidance, or God's love, or God's grace, then we have slipped right back into that age old sin of pride, arrogance, and self-worship that got us into this whole mess to begin with.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, again and again, invites us to live without fear. As scary as some of this may seem, we need not fear because God is with us. And when we are walking in God's way and encounter Satan or evil or whatever you want to call him – and we will - then we can follow Jesus' lead and simply say – “Get behind me Satan! Get out of my way.” I am a child of the light, walking humbly with my God, resisting the powers of evil in this world, and I am living my life for God's glory. May it be so!

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.jokesabout.net/hell-wrong-bus>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.tentmaker.org/articles/jesusteachingonhell.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Keith Green, No One Believes In Me Anymore from “So You Want To Go Back to Egypt.”

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters (Macmillan Publishing, 1977) p. 3

^v N.T. Wright, Mark for Everyone (WJK, 2006) p. 128

^{vi} Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words (Harper: San Fransisco, 2004) p. 150.

^{vii} Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, (WJK, 1994) p. 174