
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Oh Hell!

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

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There are 13 references to Hell in the New Testament, and three of them are in our reading today. Matthew seems also to be big on Hell with seven references. Only one in Luke. John speaks only of darkness, and Paul speaks of judgment. Mark though says Hell is that unquenchable fire, like California wildfires? and where the worm never dies. What does that mean?

What were you taught about Hell when you were growing up? Where you told you were going there if you did bad things? Where you told “go to Hell” because you disagreed with someone? When things were out of control, like your life, or the economy, were you told, “It’s all going to Hell in a handbasket”?

Some people say to me, “I’m going through Hell right now.” My mother is sick. I’ve lost all my money. All bets seem to be off these days. The Golden Rule is rusty and tarnished. Liars and cheaters seem to be getting ahead faster than telling the truth. Oh, Hell, maybe I should do some of that too! Where has all this clean livin’ gotten me anyway?

In the center of most villages, in the north of Galilee stood an olive mill. The economy was dependent on the olive, and the word Jesus uses in our text today refers to a big donkey-turned, industrial sized millstone. There were smaller, hand-sized mills, usually used by women like a mortar and pestle for the grinding of grain into flour. But here Jesus is talking about a big, round turning circle, where a pole was inserted in the hole of the millstone and a donkey or mule pressed their chest against the log and “milled around”, crushing the olives before they were put into baskets or sacks for pressing.¹ Today we use the phrase, “milling around”, like crowds, just kind of lazily walking around in circles, time on their hands, not very serious.

But people who would have heard Jesus speak of tying millstones around necks and throwing them into the sea would certainly have heard the hyperbole. Hell is not a place you go to when you do bad things, just like Heaven is not a place you go to when you do good things.

When Jesus spoke to the Jewish people of his time and spoke of the kingdom of heaven, he probably used ‘malkut shamayim’ (mahl-KOOT shah-MY-eem), a common idiom of his day. We think of kingdom as a place or a government of some sort. They heard it as ‘God reigns, or how God reigns, or those whom God reigns over.’

The essence of Jesus’ message was saying that God was different than any king they had ever seen or imagined and that he, Jesus, was different as well. The reign of God had been born again in Jesus, and as Jesus walked through the land healing and delivering God’s people, God’s heaven, God’s reign, God’s kingdom was revealing itself in a greater way than ever before as people experienced God’s saving, redeeming love. Old ways were millstones. No longer would children be neglected. No longer would greedy hands be allowed. No more shifty eyes or tripping over others to get ahead yourself. “Jesus is taking back prisoners, setting them free one life at a time.”² “Oh, Hell, now what do we do?” say the ones trapped in the old ways of spreading fear and tales of scarcity. Many of us, at different times in our lives, may have felt threatened by some kind of darkness, when life seemed to be swirling out of control. Then something happens to show us that God is with us.

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_millstones_GA.htm

² Ann Spangler, Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, Zondervan, 2009, p. 186.

A young man in a former congregation, his name was Jason, came to an understanding in his teenage years that he had been a victim of sexual abuse by his uncle. For years he carried the guilt and the shame, the anger and the pain, that this untrustworthy person of power in his life wielded over him. Jason lived in a private darkness, blaming himself. He should have made it stop. He should have told somebody. He wished he could kill the man, and as he grew from small child to really big kid, Jason made a really good decision. He got a tattoo around his ankle, barbed wire going around his leg. It was a visible witness to his own healing. He had come to a place where he could now say, “No” to his abuser. “See this barbed wire? This fence? This barrier? This is saying, ‘I am here. You have to come through me now. No longer does your abuse, your sickness destroy my life. You have no power over me. I believe I am strengthened by a much Higher Power.’”

When Jason told me that story, I could see the millstone fall from his neck. The weight of guilt and shame and anger and fear and whatever other Hells he carried around for all those years, fell into the sea. That was a day I saw healing. Jason was not cured of his abusive childhood, but he was healed.

Call it grace. Call it forgiveness. Call it the kingdom of God, malkut shamayem, God reigns. That day a new heaven and a new earth opened up for him, for his family, for their family system. That day, God’s power burst in upon lives in an astonishing way.

At times like that, when I have been witness to God’s reign, I can realize that I can never go back. I can never go back to fear. I can never go back to scarcity. I can never go back to the Hell I try to create: that I am somehow separate from God. That I am sometimes not loved or lovable by God. That I am beyond God’s possibility of peace.

These words Jesus probably did say, or something very similar to them: “Salt is good...have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

In the midst of old adages about burning fires of Hell and chopping of body parts, Jesus takes the most powerful symbol of his day, **salt**, and says, “Salt is good.” Salt was like money. You paid people in salt. It is the root of our word for salary. Babies after they were born were rubbed in salt, both as a hygiene thing, and as a blessing, an offering to God of this new precious life.³ When you made a ‘salt covenant’ with someone, that was an eternal promise. “Have salt in yourself” means trust the promise, believe in the healing, give up your ego ways, and remember God’s eternal covenant, eternal promise with us. God really is in charge of the universe. Not you. Not me. Not Wall Street or Main Street or 555 West Glendale Avenue/Street. Not those that talk the loudest, bully those most, spread fear and hate. Have salt in yourselves, the salt God gave you, child of God, beloved of God. You can take that salt to the bank. Amen.

³ <http://www5.ocn.ne.jp/~magi9/isracam3.htm>