

“I believe in Jesus who descended into Hell”

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne July 8, 2007

Reflection: Christians are quite often depicted in movies and on TV as being rigid, conservative, and sour. And while I have to admit at times I can be a bit sour, that's not God's fault. I'm here today because I also know what it means to be filled with joy, to be set free. God will not leave my soul in the dust of despair, or in the darkness of the shadow of death. In his presence there is pleasure and life. This is the time for each of us to leave behind the sour, and taste and see that our Lord is good. Let it be known to all, God is awesome in every place and time, from Heaven to hell and even to this place.

Reading from the Psalms (139 NLT)

*O Lord, you have examined my heart
And know everything about me.
You know when I sit down or stand up.
You know my every thought when far away. .
Every moment you know where I am.
I can never escape from your spirit!
I can never get away from your presence!
But even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
To you the night shines as bright as day.
Darkness and light are both alike to you.
If I go up to heaven, you are there;
If I go down to the place of the dead, you are there.
If I ride the wings of the morning,
If I dwell by the farthest oceans,
Even there your hand will guide me,
And your strength will support me.*

Intro to the Message: Each week this summer we are going back to basics, the basics of our faith. They were handed down to us from those men who were eye-witnesses and who heard Jesus, and walked with him, and saw him both on the cross and after he rose from the dead. They left behind them a legacy of faith summed up in the words of the Creed. You can think of these words as the Christian's LCD, the lowest common denominator of our faith. The Creed professes the things all Christians can share in common, even if we bicker about other things. That means when those who call themselves Christians teach things that do not agree with the creeds, it's important to stand up and call time out. The Church needs to set boundaries over what can be said to be part of our belief, and what can not. Some parts of what we believe as Christians are simply essential, nonnegotiable. I understand that's not a modern ideal. Many Christian leaders today say we should focus more on being welcoming and inclusive of all people and all ideas. That sounds good doesn't it? I mean, isn't God loving and welcoming? And who's to say that one thing, one practice, one teaching, is any better than any other?

Well, I have an answer for that. Who gets to decide what's right? God. And while we humans are famous for getting things wrong, God isn't. Even when what God teaches us seems at first to be unloving ... Take Hell for instance. Now that's an unpopular thing, unless you use the word to describe just how challenging your day has been, as in “*Oh, I've just had a Hell of a day.*” Yup, make anything more of Hell than an adjective to describe the depths of despair or the heights of human depravity and you start wandering outside the boundaries of polite conversation. Today churches are decidedly uncomfortable with Hell as a theological idea, as a real place. The Washington Post runs a silly little column on the Religion page each week where people comment on a question asked of some “50 figures from around the world” who make up their panel of experts. The answers are very much weighted against Christian faith. Last week's question lead the one panelist who was quoted in the paper to say, “Of all the pointless, utterly childish notions associated with traditional religion, belief in eternal bliss in heaven or eternal damnation in Hell surely tops the list.” So much for tolerating other people's views, huh? Just goes to show if you say you

believe in Hell someone will point a finger at you and call you the worst name possible. They'll call you a fundamentalist. And once the modern world calls you that, it no longer needs to respect you.

And yet each week, when we say the creed, we say we believe in Hell. We even believe Jesus went to Hell. It's what

you'd call a fundamental part of our faith. I guess that makes me a fundamentalist. But why is Hell important? Well, we say we believe Jesus went to Hell and back again so you won't have to. We profess our belief that Jesus went to Hell in order to show you he would go any distance to show his love for you. Others seem to have gone farther these days. The church has added a new translation of the Creed which replaced the word Hell, so that people would stand more easily as they said, “*I believe in Jesus who descended to the dead.*”

Get rid of Hell and you might as well get rid of Jesus. Who'd need him? Is there any message of hope for Christians in talking about Hell? There is to me.

I've always gotten a chuckle out of that. We got rid of the word Hell, but we kept the word Heaven in the next phrase when we say *"and on the third day he ascended into Heaven."* To keep Heaven but get rid of Hell seems like wishful thinking. I can hear it now: *"We'll just keep the nice thoughts and no longer talk about those nasty things like punishment or Hell. That's not very inclusive or loving or welcoming, now is it? And after all, didn't Jesus talked about love?"*

Yes Jesus spoke of love, but he also talked about Hell, on more than a few occasions. It just goes to prove, you can't always get what you want, or what you wish for. Many years back my wife found this bumper sticker which says, *"This is not one of my three wishes."* It's a cute thing, but instead of putting it on the car, she attached it to the mirror on her dresser. It got me wondering after a while because it was in the mirror she sees when she gets dressed. OK, but it's also the mirror that she can see me in when we're getting ready to go to sleep ... so I was trying not to take it personally that each night when she was drifting off to sleep and she looked over to the mirror and saw me, she wasn't thinking about me not being one of her three wishes. Years later Gina mentioned that no, the sticker was on the mirror right where she stands to do the ironing each week, and that was the significance of where it ended up. Then she added, *"Of course, there are those days ..."* Yup, it's a funny sticker. But what's really funny about it is the wording. It took me years to notice. Read it with me one more time, *"This was not one of my three wishes."* Only that's not what it says. There's an extra "of" on the sticker. Your mind plays a trick on you and you jump right past it because it seems out of place. You just know that can't be right so you ignore the thing that shouldn't be there. Funny. That's exactly what the church has been doing for years now. It has been trying to read quickly past any mention of the word Hell. Did you know that the schedule of Bible lessons most Episcopal churches read each Sunday have been set up to edit out any reference to Hell? I guess if you never read about it, it's not real ...

Only you don't do anyone any good by ignoring Hell or pretending it's not there. Jesus spoke about it more than once or twice. And each week in the creed, Christians at least say they believe in hell, though perhaps they don't. So really, what's it matter if Jesus descended into Hell? Maybe that's just some leftover bit of the story, and not particularly important. Is Hell really essential and nonnegotiable? Yes. Get rid of Hell and you might as well get rid of Jesus. Who'd need him? Is there any message of hope for Christians in talking about Hell? There is to me. Here's how the Bible puts it: *If you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it ... Christ suffered when he died for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners that he might bring us safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit. So he went and preached to the spirits in prison, those who disobeyed God long ago ... Now, Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor*

next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers are bowing before him. [1 Peter 3:15-22 NLT]

I'll agree if all we did in talking about Hell was to wish for people we don't like to be punished, there would be no value to it. But here we see there's enough value in Hell for Jesus to go there first thing, before he ascended to Heaven. There are two parts of this that are essential to our faith. The first is what it says about Jesus. The second is how you can live differently knowing God is willing to go to Hell and back again to help you live freely.

For the last couple of weeks we've been talking about our faith in Jesus. We believe he was a real person, as the ancient history books beyond the Bible bear witness. We believe as a real person, he lived like any of us, and

he knew what it was to suffer, to be hungry, to be thirsty, to know pain. Then, like every other real living person who has ever walked the earth, we believe Jesus died. At least Christians do. Muslims read in the Koran that Jesus did not die on the cross. That was make-believe. Other people who have thought of themselves as Christians throughout the centuries have held a similar belief, thinking God could not suffer or die, so either Jesus was not human, or the God part of him left the human part back on the cross ... kind of like getting beamed up at the last moment. The church has used the creeds for 2000 years to state clearly that we believe Jesus was both God and man, and somehow he was able to be born, to live, to suffer, and to die. Not just to die, but to be really, really dead. Some folk have suggested Jesus only passed out or he entered into suspended animation, only to wake up alive once he was laid in the cold tomb. Nope. Christians believe he was so dead, he entered into Hell. He took his time before rising from the grave, certainly adding a dramatic ... pause ... that caught everyone by surprise. But there was more to it than that. I believe Jesus waited to be raised from the dead to make sure everyone knew he was really dead. Like in that most famous of British comedy skits, we could look at Jesus on the cross and say, *"This savior is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If 'e hadn't been nailed to the cross 'e'd be pushing up the daisies ... 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible! He is an ex-savior."* (The Pet Shop, by Monty Python)

So when we say we believe Jesus not only died, but he descended to the dead, we're saying there were no tricks, no special effects. He was fully, really, truly dead. That makes his coming back to life again so wonderful. But there's another reason why mentioning Hell here is essential to our faith in God. In the time he was in the tomb, we are told, Jesus went to preach to those who had died already and were in Hell (or Hades, Sheol, Gehanna, or the Pit, since the Bible has many different words, each with a slightly different mean-

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ing, for where the dead hang out). Jesus went to offer hope to those who had not heard the good news of God's promise. He opened up not only the gate of Hell in order to get in there, but in so doing he also opened the gate of Heaven to let those who wanted to get out of Hell free.

In my line of work, I meet people who have a lot of questions about God. One of the questions they have about Christianity is how the Bible can say if you don't accept Jesus you can't go to Heaven. Let's start by acknowledging what the Bible teaches is a bit more nuanced than that ... for instance we're told it's only in knowing Jesus as the Son of God that you can come to God and know him as a Father. That one doesn't upset me. It makes sense. How could you come to know God as a Father if he didn't have any children? Then there's the part of the Bible that says, "*There is no other name by which men can be saved but Jesus.*" That one's not so bad either. It just says if you are going to drop names and expect to get some help, there's only one name that works. Buddha never asked people to use his name, nor did Joseph Smith, and Mohammed is revered as a prophet, but Muslims don't use his name to get into paradise either. Actually the Bible offers the world hope, saying those who do not know Jesus will only be judged by how they have responded to the evidence God has left of himself in creation. You won't be condemned for what you don't know, you'll be judged on what you did with what you did know. Back to Hell though, I find great hope in this, that the first thing Jesus did once he had died was to reach out to those who had died without knowing him. He went so far as to carry his message to the end of everything, to help others find their way out of Hell. That's a good thing. It tells me God's love is universal, or as Robert shared with us, that there is no place you can go that is too far off for God to reach out and find you, and touch your heart, and take you by the hand, and bring you back home.

I understand the concerns people have. They wonder how a loving God could send people to Hell. Wouldn't he want everyone to come to Heaven? Wouldn't a loving God do everything, absolutely everything in his power to bring everyone to Heaven and keep them out of Hell? Yes, he would. Better yet, God has. He already has ... That's what the creed means when it says he died on the cross, was buried, descended to Hell. God has done everything in his power to keep Hell empty. There's just one thing not in his power. God still lets you and me make our own choices. You can choose to turn your back on God and walk away. You can choose to hold onto something you want so much that you won't be able to take God's hand. You can do that, and God will be powerless to stop you. He doesn't force people into Heaven, and that's why there has to be a Hell. If there was no Hell, you would have no choice in the matter. God would then no longer be loving, he'd become a puppet master controlling your life. But no. A loving God will love you enough to let you make your own choices. We see this in all the references to Hell in the Bible (to Hell or Hades, Sheol, whatever you want to call it). There's only one group that gets sent to Hell by God. You know who they are? Fallen angels. You know why? No, me neither. For the rest of us, there's no talk of sending you to Hell, but rather in God letting you go down, of people sinking down, or finding

themselves abandoned to the Pit. God doesn't need to send people to Hell, so often they fall into it naturally. What's amazing is not that there is a Hell, but that any of us can find a way out at all. But that's the promise of a loving God. He wants only that people, all people, everyone one you know, everyone one of you here, that everyone, absolutely everyone would come back home to him. Here's part of what Jesus promised: *Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst ... those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them. For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me ... And this is the will of God, that I should not lose even one of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them to eternal life at the last day. For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life—that I should raise them at the last day."* [John 6:35-40 NLT]

It is the Father's will that no one be lost, but that all people be saved. That's the loving part of God. He's given you an invitation. If you come back to God he will not reject you. That's his part. Now comes your part. Will you accept the invitation? Will you come back to God, not once, but every day? Coming back to God will mean different things to each of you ... For some it may mean giving up an addiction, or forgiving an old hurt, or trusting in God more than your ability to reason everything out on your own. Those are the kinds of decisions you face every day. Yet even though they're everyday decisions, they carry eternal consequences. The decisions you make today will bring you closer to God or mean turning your back on God. Those decisions will either bring you closer to Heaven or another day closer to Hell. That's why we've been talking about how your beliefs will change your behaviors. Today I'm reminding you that your behaviors change your destination.

What difference does this make to me? Well, I'm sure you've been in the situation before. It's an uneasy feeling. Where once you had a good relationship with someone else, now it's not good. You'd prefer to avoid them completely. Maybe something big happened, maybe you drifted away. Maybe someone's to blame, maybe both of you are to blame. But sometimes in a relationship there comes a time when you figure you've passed the place where you can ever go back to the way it was. Your spouse has cheated on you or lied to you. You don't know if you can ever trust them again. Maybe it was you, and you said something you wish you had never said. But life does not come with a rewind or an erase button. Saying you are sorry has not helped. Have you felt that way before? Have you felt stuck? Or perhaps you've been on the other side and said to yourself, "*I can never forgive what that person has done to me ...*" Maybe it was something you did long ago, and it has haunted you ever since. You wish you could change the past, but you can't. You simply know that no matter what you do, the other person will never take you back, will never love you or respect you as they did before.

Having lived through a few experiences like that you can start to live more carefully. That would make sense after all. What doesn't make sense is what many of us do instead. Instead of learning to be reconciled we learn to make choices based

on the fear of upsetting others. So you overlook bad behavior and you put up with a lot of things you don't really enjoy. You overlook things that you don't actually forget, because they keep bothering you. And yet, instead of talking openly with that other person about it, you bottle it up inside, all because you're afraid they may get mad at you, and not love you, and reject you. A time may come when you've practiced this so much you do the same thing with God, where you try to live in a way that will please God because you're afraid if you don't, he'll zap you and send you straight to Hell. But that's no way to live. It's certainly no way to find eternal life.

God has promised he will not reject anyone who comes to him, who trust in him. But you have to be honest enough with yourself to know you need God's help. You can't find a way out of Hell on your own. It comes down to trusting the only one who's been there and back again: Jesus. Can you, will you choose to trust God not to reject you? Will you, can you, be honest enough to ask for his help?

Brennan Manning tells the story of honesty and rejection in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel ...*

Insert story here ...

Those who know they can't do it on their own are able to forgive and welcome other sinners along the way. For the way out of Hell is not found by trying harder or being perfect. You find the way out of Hell and back to God when you recognize you need someone to guide you, and you are willing to trust Jesus to forgive, forget, and forge ahead. Then we can return to God, to the love we know will never be denied.

Returning

words and music by Henry Fiske

*I am returning, returning to you
You are the only thing I know that satisfies
I am returning, returning to you
To a love I know will never be denied
And the miracle to me after all that I have done
You still welcome my return with open arms
I'm returning home to where my heart belongs*