Psalm 139: 7-12, John 5:25-30

“Heaven and Hell”

Well, as I mentioned in the enews that I sent out this week, I was up later than normal this past week watching the Republican Convention, and next week will be no different as I watch the Democratic Convention. There has been a real shift over the years in how many times the name of God has been brought up at these conventions. This past week it was mentioned 95 times in the speakers’ comments. It has been quite a dramatic increase over these past 15 years. It makes you wonder if God is being invoked by both, well, does God choose one of the other, or is God at both and at times He is pleased and other times cringing like we were with Clint Eastwood talking to an empty chair.

It reminds me of a joke I heard in Rome from a Catholic priest who is a friend of mine. He said: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were together wondering where they were going to go on vacation for Labor Day. The Father said, I’m going to America, they seem to like me there, at least they call on my name a lot, and I always enjoy it when I’m there. The Son said I’m going back to Palestine to sees some old friends and get me some good home cooked meals. The Holy Spirit said, I think I’ll go to Rome, I’ve never been there. This isn’t my joke, let me be clear.

The absence, or presence, of God has been at the core of defining heaven and hell since they were first mentioned in Scripture. Both John 5 and Psalm 139 address the presence of God in relationship to heaven and hell. But what can you take home today, besides heat stroke, as we speak about what do these verses say about heaven and hell? What I hope you are able to see in both of these Scriptures and take with you is the certain presence of God.

If it is true that we cannot flee from the presence of God or that God speaks even to the dead for them to listen, then vcan’y we take home today the realization that during those times in our lives when we wonder about God’s presence, we can say assuredly if God is present in some form even in hell, well, then he is surely present with me now. Let’s read.

**READ**

There are quite a few stories about my brother John and I while we were in seminary together. Most of them have to do with him and his missteps. He often did the unexpected. For preaching 101 every student was required to read a Scripture dramatically in front of the class and have it videotaped so that it could be later critiqued. His Scripture was Luke 1:28 where the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and stated “Hail, o favored one”. So he worked hard and had it down and with the camera rolling he got to that famous line and with a loud shout and an over exaggerated dramatic emphasis he said not “hail Mary” but rather the third word in our sermon title today, Mary. There was a stunned silence in the room after he said it.

For the next 15 years the professor of that class showed that video to incoming students as an example of how not to read Scripture. But just saying that word in public kind of shakes us up and it has become a curse word of sorts that is considered very inappropriate language in public discourse. Our understanding of hell has been largely shaped by Dante’s inferno and Milton’s Paradise Lost, but Scripture has something to say about it as well.

Psalm 139 is a Scripture that I love to read when I have a captive audience at the hospital in the pre-op room for a patient getting ready to go into surgery. There are a couple of reasons why I love this reading this Scripture: 1. It tells us that first of all God created us and knows everything about us not only what we are thinking but also our bodies. He has known every detail of how our bodies are put together even before we are born. He intricately and purposefully wove us and knit us together in our mother’s womb. So whatever physical reality we are facing that is about to be fixed on that surgeon’s table, God has had a handle on it for a very long time. 2. Secondly, and this is why we are looking at these verses today, God will always be with us and accompany us no matter where we go. We cannot flee from God’s presence whether we want to or not. That question which is asked in verse 7 serves as the foundation to this sermon and any response that we want to give if people want to know where is God in the midst of all this. He never left. He is right here beside you. I’m guessing that is nice to hear as you leave your family to be operated on knowing that God will never leave or forsake you.

The word that is used to describe what we think of hell in Psalm 139 we find in vs. 8. It is the word Sheol. In Hebrew Sheol was defined as the place of the dead. It would be as if we were using the word grave. It is a place where everyone eventually goes in the Old Testament understanding. It is not, like our understanding of hell, a place where people go to be punished. We find that same word used, Sheol, by Jonah when he is swallowed by the whale when he states in 2:2 – “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me, out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.”

A common variable in Sheol depicted in Psalm 139 and also found in Jonah is that God is still very present there so that he is able to hear our cry or accompany us as we try to flee from him. We find that also in the New Testament in John 5.

Now, in the New Testament hell or Hades is more often seen as a place of punishment. Like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel you have the gates of Hades, depicted as a river, where the righteous and the unrighteous are separated. We find that place of punishment in John 5, Matthew 25, throughout many place in Scripture where it is a literal place that you go and where you if you are judged not to be righteous then you end up in that place, and it is not a very nice place.

I’m a little uncomfortable as a Protestant with the criteria that is used in John 5 and in other places to identify those who will ultimately end up in that bad place where people weep and gnash their teeth. Whenever you talk about judgment being a separation between the good and the bad and not believers and unbelievers, well, I get nervous. But you can’t win all the battles in Scripture in one sermon, so just trust me that you don’t want to go down that road of works salvation. But suffice it to say that hell here is portrayed in a way in which we are much more familiar. We read about weeping and gnashing of teeth, a fiery pit.

But look at what happens in vs. 25 of John 5. The dead will hear the voice of God. God will speak even to those in hell. This isn’t such a crazy thought especially if we believe in a God of grace and mercy. But also in the Apostles’ Creed we hear that Jesus himself descended into hell. Romans 8 tells us that I am convinced that neither death nor life can separate us from the presence of God.

We already saw last week that when it comes to the final judgment we already have the greatest ally on our side and that is Jesus Christ. So, if we have established that both heaven and hell are real places, and in our New Testament understanding they are real places where people will be separated, then it makes sense that we also have seen that our God has not created any barriers to him having access to us in either place.

Today we have focused more on hell, because for many of us it is a lot more troubling. We believe in it so there has to be some pause as we speak about it. When we die, we believe, there is no time gap or hesitation. We are either taken to live with Christ eternally in heaven, or separated and taken, as John 5 states to condemnation. There is no waiting room, or purgatory, or in between place while God makes up his mind. Hell, John 5 tells us, is a place of condemnation. Heaven, John 5 also tells us, is life. A complete and full life in Christ.

Jesus says this to provide a choice to his listeners, the same choice that we face today. We can choose between life or condemnation. Boy, this doesn’t sound like an open minded Presbyterian, much more like an exclusive Christ and less like an inclusive salvation from last week. But what we find in this Scripture is that God never, ever gives up on us. He will never leave or forsake us whether we are living in hell on earth, or in literal hell.

Over this summer I know I have talked to a number of you that have seen the presence of God in your life or in the life of a loved one in your family or circle of friends. You’ve seen a youth turn their life around and given a second chance. You’ve seen God accompany you during a death that has rocked your world. You’ve seen God provide a job just at the right time. You’ve seen God work on you in the hospital when you didn’t think anyone was paying attention, much less God.

It’s not heaven and hell, but it could have been hell on earth that you have seen dissolve like snow or vanish because of the evident presence of God’s mercy. If you haven’t lived that, trust me, God has not left you or forsaken you so why would you not choose anything but life, as reflected in John 5. Amen.