

Deuteronomy 17:2-7 and Hebrews 10:26-32

“Hell”

What a week of weather it has been. The smoke from the fires and the heat have created an environment perfectly suited for my sermon title. I couldn't have planned it better. We don't talk much about hell around here, do we? In fact, I think the last time that we talked about hell was back in 2015 when we were doing the Apostle's Creed and Leo sang a solo in church from a cover of Highway to Hell. It has taken 11 years for me, Leo, and the church to recover. But here we are.

So much happened in Italy that was clearly the hand of God directing and guiding from the children being open and receptive to the Gospel, to the principal of the school bringing in elected officials to see what we were doing. It was powerful. Also powerful for the youth and the adults were some of the things that we did that were not related to the VBS. We went and visited the Sistine chapel and there as you walk in, you can almost miss it, because behind you is this painting by Michelangelo. It is called the Last Judgment and it is meant to be a slam against the Reformation and people like us who believed the church was called to be different than what it was in the 16th century. Hell is a primary medium in this painting and it was reserved, according to the painting, for people like us.

How does that make you feel, that there was a whole group of people who knew that we were bound for hell because of what we believed and how we worshipped God? Not good, right? When we talk about hell it is normally reserved for those who are not like us, not for us, because we are good to go in our interpretation of things. But for the most part, we don't address hell directly in these settings on Sunday morning. It offends our 21st century sensibilities and we know that winning disciples through fear makes a poor disciple, so we shy away from it, don't talk about it much at all.

In 1741 a great awakening was happening in our country and it was led by the Presbyterian Church and one of the stars of that awakening was Jonathan Edwards, again, a Presbyterian minister. So it is in our DNA to address hell. He preached a sermon that year entitled “Sinners in the hands of an angry God”. He addressed three primary topics: The horrors of hell, the dangers of sin, and the terrors of being lost. He stated that there is nothing that keeps wicked men at any moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God. He described the devil as waiting for God to release us of his care, of his grasp, and he stated that we deserve to be released.

Head on, that's how he addressed it. We don't do that anymore, in fact, I wonder if we ever really even think about hell at all? Well, today, if at least for one day, we will, and we will see what the Bible actually says about hell. Let's read.

READ

We are not short on places in Scripture that describe and define hell. The most common way that we find is in Revelation chapters 19 and 20 where it is described as a lake of fire and brimstone. That's where the term preaching fire and brimstone comes from, the description of Revelation of what hell is going to be like and what it is like now, actually. Revelation 20:14-15 paints a picture not dissimilar to what Michelangelo does. Hell and fire are seen as hand in glove not only in revelation but also all throughout Scripture. Luke 16:23-24 where the rich man goes to hell and asks that Lazarus would dip his tongue in water because he is being tormented with the flames. Matthew 13:42 The furnace of fire and the weeping and gnashing of teeth is seen as reserved for those who do not do the will of God. Matthew 25:41 where hell is described as eternal fire and reserved for those who did not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc.

The New Testament is not shy about hell and the most common description of hell is that of fire and flames and torment and torture. But there is less consistency on who it is that goes to hell. More often than not we find described those who do not do the will of the Father. Remember that word righteousness, doing the will of God, well the unrighteous, those who do not do the will of God, are the most common targets of the hell described in Scripture. There is less emphasis on believing correctly, and more emphasis on acting correctly. I know, I know, we are wandering into a works salvation approach, and that is not where we will end up, because loving God and loving neighbor are inseparable and you cannot believe correctly that Jesus is Savior if you turn your back on the foreigner, or the hungry, or the naked etc. Belief and action go hand in hand and woe to the one who tries to separate the two.

But there is one category of people for whom the hottest fires of hell are reserved and that is the group of people that our author of Hebrews today addresses. The apostates. Who are the apostates? The apostates are one of us, those who believed, those who were part of the community, those who fully and completely gave their life over to Christ and then turned their back on Christ. The reason we read the Scripture in Deuteronomy is because it describes what the people of Israel are supposed to do with one of their own, a person born and raised within the community of faith in Israel, and then takes the step of worshipping a false god, an idol,

something made by hand. This is such a serious accusation that it is not enough for just one person to accuse, but there has to be at least 2 or 3 witnesses. That person who has turned their back on the God of Israel, who has fallen to worship the idols that were so prevalent in their day by the other nations surrounding them, is to be stoned to death, is to be killed.

This is serious business here. The author of Hebrews throughout this book describes the seriousness of those who once believed and now have abandoned the faith. Who have said that they are disciples of Jesus, but when push came to shove, and that happened often in the 1st century, then they backed off and said no, I don't believe in Jesus any longer. Look at vs. 26, all of a sudden the tone of the author changes from one of encouraging and one of building up, to one of warning, and even condemnation and judgment. He talks specifically about those who were in the faith, but now willfully persist in sin. I need to say, that is such an accurate statement for all of us, isn't it? People who willfully persist in sin?

The apostate, the one who willfully persists in sin even after having tasted the freedom and the love of Christ, is the one who knows that death has been swallowed up in victory but still chooses death. The apostate we know manifests sin in tragic proportions and judgment is woven into the fabric of choice. It is not something that happens to us, it is something that we choose, we willfully persist. What a damning term that is, again to describe us. We are rash children clinging to the rope of faith and as we get to the top we are considering letting go. If we do, there is no one who will save us, will fall, eternally. What the author is telling us is that when we persist in our sin there remains a fearful prospect of judgment. This fearful prospect is highlighted by fire, he says a fury of fire in vs.27. It is the Scripture before us, we can't avoid it.

We live in an age of apostasy of individuals and of churches and of organizations and groups that call themselves followers of Jesus and yet the sacrificial living that is required of us has disappeared. We are apostates, full stop. We live in a time where people know the truth, but refuse to allow themselves to be free in that truth, they would rather serve and honor the norms that have been established around us. We have done a good job of normalizing the lifestyles and the needs that we think we have, even if they come in direct conflict with our necessary discipleship.

We all create a scenario in our minds on how we will escape hell. But none of that is Scripture based. We view ourselves as healthy and we try our hardest to preserve our lives, but that's not the answer, and deep down we know it. We know how fragile our life is, at any

moment we can come face to face with our own mortality, but like hell, we push that away as well, not wanting to change and seeing how everyone else is living and thinking that is the norm for the Christian church and the disciple of Jesus, when there is no sacrifice present at all. We have built up a false hope and a false defense that is based upon what we consider to be a Christian ethos which is really a selfish approach to life.

But what the author here today wants to get across to us today is that there is something even worse than death, even as we try to live our lives in order to prevent it, and do nothing to prevent the presence of hell. The states in vs.29 that there is worse punishment than death for those who do not take seriously Jesus and his work for us which requires a servant life, not a life of accumulating wealth and false security. He states that there is worse punishment than death for those who have received the grace offered by the blood of Jesus and then turned their back on it. There will be worse punishment than death for those who have outraged the Spirit of grace. Grace has been given, but then when we refuse it, yeah, that is somewhat outrageous.

Willful, consistent disobedience. On Friday, at the British Open, one of my favorite golfers, was penalized two strokes for improving his lie. He was furious, he clearly did not mean to do it at all, but those are the rules of golf, whether you willfully do it or not, you will get punished. That is not so here, the author talks about willful, purposefully persisting in sin. Once we hear about the Word of God and receive understanding of the covenant that is before us, and then we persist in sin after all that, then the sacrifice that is made on our behalf, the benefit we receive from the blood of Jesus no longer remains. We become, as Jesus said, fit for hell.

Let's be clear, we don't want disciples in this church who are motivated by fear, but the dangers and the reality of hell need to be a sobering reminder to us as we carry on with life completely free of any concern for our actions and our sins, that hell does exist. Just as heaven is real, so is hell. And it ought to be sobering as we trample upon the poor, and the marginalized in this country.

So, where does that leave us? It is true that the most faithful of us in this room persist in sin. Let's get that out there before anyone starts to think they can take up the first stone. It is also true that when an individual turns their back on Jesus it does not just affect that individual and their families. Apostates are those who embrace worldliness in preference to the community. In their world, in their lives, the sacred has been collapsed into the profane. Now,

let's be clear, judgment for the apostate as this Scripture makes clear, rests on the Lord, not on the community.

Our real goal here today is to generate encouragement, not guilt or fear. I'm not sure how successful I was with that goal today. Our Scripture carries with it a consistent message of hell reserved for those who do not follow Jesus in this life. Hell is an eternal torment of fire, as described by various authors in the New Testament. Yet, while this is true, fear does not make a good disciple. Joy and thanksgiving are necessary pieces to this faith puzzle. May God bless us and keep us as we consider our own salvation, Amen.