



“Jesus in Hell”

Texts: Psalm 139:1-12 and John 1:1-14

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So it was several weeks ago when Kevin announced that his recent sermon in response to a request had led to a few more requests including a request for a sermon on ‘why we say Jesus descended into hell’. I volunteered to take that topic for our sermon today, ostensibly because I knew the answer to the question, the simple answer. I’m always up for a gold star. But over the past couple weeks the depth and challenge of the question has settled in for me. We can only scratch the surface.

The easy answer is that the traditional English translation of the ancient Apostles’ Creed leads to confusion because some of the words have different meanings now than they did way back when. Case in point: “from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” Well, I grew up saying that every Sunday and just assumed that was why my mom always told me to hurry – be quick or you’ll be dead. I had to grow up to find out that quick is an archaic word meaning living. He will judge the living and the dead. In the same way, from time to time people will tell us that they hold their breath when we say “I believe in the holy catholic church,” because, well, we’re Protestants. But this creed was in use and written down long before there was a Catholic Church and an Orthodox Church, let alone a Protestant Church. Catholic is an adjective that means universal. I believe in one universal church.

So that brings us to hell (as it were). In the traditional English translation of the Apostles’ Creed we say, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

He descended into hell.

So way back before there was a Catholic Church and a Protestant Church, way back when before there was Dante's Divine Comedy and his richly imaged poem about hell, "Inferno" – long before that, going to hell simply meant being dead. No value judgment. No fire. More like the Greek underworld than fires and torture. The Hebrew name for the place was Sheol, which we read in Psalm 139. "If I make my bed in Sheol" – if I'm in my grave – if I'm dead – still you, God, are with me.

So all the Apostles' Creed wants to say is the fundamental truth of our faith: that Jesus was human, fully human, that he felt pain as we do, that he suffered an excruciatingly cruel and torturous execution and at the end of it he was dead. Really dead. A dead human body. That resurrection was no smoke and mirrors. Jesus wasn't magically able to get out of the worst of what we humans can do to one another – he suffered, just as people today suffer when they are tortured, abused, executed. And he died. Just like we all die. The Creed affirms that this human Jesus, God's beloved child, lived a fully human life and died. He went where all dead people go. Hell, the place where dead people go.

So that's the simple answer to the question. We say those words because we are using an old translation of the earliest Christian Creed – we say the creed much as Jews recount the story of the Exodus – we say it standing in line with the earliest apostles and believers – this creed probably goes back to the 2nd or 3rd century as a baptismal formula – it was written down and called the Apostles' creed by the end of the 4th century. Before Dante and before English.

Now, I'm a big believer that we should be using a better translation, and there is one: the ecumenical translation was completed in 1988 by an international ecumenical council on English language liturgy. Living instead of quick. Descended to the dead instead of hell. Holy Spirit instead of Holy Ghost. That could help our kids and those who come new to the faith without the lifelong history with the creed that many of us have.

But that's really not the end of this.

A few weeks ago Kevin had a pretty bad cold-virus-thing that hung on for quite a long time. As a family friend had recently died, I wasn't really surprised when my daughter Lydia asked me one day if Daddy is going to die. No, not now. Not from this. We were in the car. And then a few minutes later, she asked, "Is Daddy going to hell?" We had just passed one of those billboards.

Now, forget about all the deliciously tempting ways there are to answer that question!

That stark question about eternity, once only seen on hand painted signs by the side of the road or the sides of barn way out in the country can now be found on billboards along I-69 and Green River Road. This is the dominant cultural understanding of what the Christian faith is about. Even a young person with an intellectual disability and a religious upbringing that has focused on love and mercy has absorbed this view of heaven and hell. This dominant cultural understanding of Christianity is

held by Christians and non-Christians, by practicing every-Sunday Christians and by casual non-church-going Americans, and of course it is rooted in fear of a God who is surely to be feared. Accept Christ, become a Christian, or suffer eternal torture in the fires of hell.

In a 2007 Baylor University Religion Survey asking Americans if hell exists, 53% said absolutely, and nearly 20% said probably. The probably-not camp comes in at 16% and the absolutely-not at 11%. So three-quarters of us are sure or pretty sure that there exists such a thing as hell.

The current TV comedy, "The Good Place," plays on the fact that we have this common cultural understanding that there's a good place and there's a bad place and where we go after we die is totally tied to our behavior and choices in this place. Very light comedy, but that's the topic. Ted Danson plays the architect of "the good place" where Kristen Bell's character has ended up by mistake. The show makes no religious claims or assertions whatsoever, but it plays on our common cultural belief. It's all about who was morally upstanding in life and who wasn't. And the bar is high. In the show, one's experience of either 'the good place' or 'the bad place' is totally and often hilariously personalized. So Bell's character Eleanor who hated clowns and baby showers in life is doomed to an endless diet of both in the bad place. And the young man whose happiest moment in life was rowing a boat across a still lake while sipping wine and reading French poetry gets to do exactly that in 'the good place' even though French poetry sounds like torture to someone else. "The Good Place" offers a playful look at what it really means to try to separate the good from the bad from the in-between. Because it turns out it's not as easy as it might seem - even Bell's character, who was perfectly awful in life, turns out to have good qualities and to be capable of improvement when she lands in the good place. It's complicated.

So what it means to believe in hell, what it means to wonder and worry about going to hell, and what all that says about our belief in a loving and merciful God and his only son our Lord who died and rose to set us right with God and one another - that's all still on the table, even if we change which translation of the creed we use.

To this day our conception is more heavily influenced by Dante and the Middle Ages than it is by the Bible. There are places in the Bible which talk of unquenchable fire, and there are certainly passages about judgment. But we always have to take the Bible in total, and it has so much more to inform our thinking about life and death, about heaven and hell, and about what Jesus has to do with it.

Let's come back to Psalm 139. For the psalmist, God is with us no matter what. "Where can I go from your presence? Where can I flee from your spirit? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol" - the place of the dead, "you are there". Some versions translate Sheol as "the grave" - if I make my bed in the grave - in other words, if I die - you, God, are still with me. This beautiful psalm offers the same understanding that Paul wrote to the Corinthians - if we live, we live to

the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. "You are with me when I sit down and when I rise up. You search out my path and my lying down. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me."

Indeed. Too wonderful. The great God of heaven and earth as near as our every breath and there to hold us when we take our last breath as well.

This is our faith. Again, St. Paul: if God is for us, who can be against us? Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Is Daddy going to hell? Wherever Daddy is God will be there first. Nothing can take Daddy – or you – from God's loving embrace.

And that means even and especially when you're going through hell. You know what I mean? There is such a thing as hell on earth, isn't there? There are people whose lives are a living hell. People whose mental, physical, spiritual, emotional suffering is acute – people who are estranged from family and friends, estranged from God. People victimized by injustice and oppression in ways that privileged folks like me really can't imagine. I believe there is such a thing as hell on earth.

And I'm here to say that God is there. That's the promise of the psalmist, of Paul, of centuries of Christian faith. God is there. And Jesus has been there. That's what we mean when we say the Word became flesh and dwelt among us – literally pitched a tent in our midst. The humanity of Jesus, a God who is so fully present with us as to come among us as one of us, Word made Flesh, incarnate, fully human fully God, is the core of our faith. Did Jesus go to hell? Not the way you think. But Jesus is has been through the worst this world has to offer, and so when your life is a living hell, Jesus is right there with you. The creed's affirmation that Jesus lived and died and was totally dead, gone to the place where dead people go, means the Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us, walking alongside us, dealing with the joys and the sorrows, the pains and the injustices of this life. Where can I go from your presence?

What it means to be a Christian, then, what it means to be the Church, is to go where Jesus is, to go where Jesus would go, to be the Body of Christ for those near us, and nearby us, who live in hell. How will they know that God loves them and that Jesus walks with them through the darkest and most evil way the world can dish out, unless we're there to show them, to model God's ever-present love, and Jesus' enfleshed love and mercy.

And so rather than worrying about who's going where for eternity and quizzing everyone about that, we believers are called to enflesh and incarnate this same good news that saves us and to carry it especially to those whose lives are a living hell and those who have absorbed this idea that our faith is about nothing more than worrying about a fiery eternity – to carry God's love and Jesus' compassion to hurting people and hurting places in our homes and our neighborhoods and our community and our world. Because there, we will surely meet Jesus who descends to where we are. Amen.