

Proper 21B: Mark 9:38-50
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
Church of the Good Shepherd
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The Good News of Hell

A retired priest I knew in Michigan told me about the shortest sermon he'd ever preached. It was summer during a heat wave, and the church didn't have air conditioning. He got up in the pulpit, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Today is hot. Hell is hotter. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." He then sat down.

Now, I don't know if he really did that or if he was just pulling my leg. Because it's not that common to hear a sermon these days on the subject of hell, especially in the Episcopal church. The notion is considered by many to be an outmoded idea, offensive, unfair, and worse not "inclusive." Even among the faithful, there are plenty of people who can't make sense of how a loving God could consign people to eternal damnation.

And yet, though he never dwells on the subject, Jesus *does* talk about hell, as he does in this morning's Gospel. And he speaks of it in rather vivid, even scary terms—a place of undying worms and unquenchable fire. What are we—nice, caring, thoughtful people—supposed to do with *that*, with hell??? Most of us, I'm sure, would like to just ignore it, to pass right over mentions of hell and judgment in Scripture, as one whistles when passing a graveyard. But I don't know that this solves the problem. Ignoring things we don't like never helps. For those of us who care about Scripture and seek to understand God through it, we have to reckon with hell, unpleasant though it may be.

But coming to terms with it is easier said than done. Because the Bible actually doesn't say much about hell, or heaven for that matter, beyond the fact that they exist. Jesus never directly tells us about hell. The few references that are made are evocative, poetic not definitive or explanatory.

Today's Gospel is a perfect example. Jesus doesn't say much about hell here. Rather he evokes images, allusions, such as in the word he uses for hell. It's not *Hades*, the usual Greek word for hell—but rather *Gehenna*. Gehenna, or Gehinnom, is the name of a real place, the "Valley of Hinnom," which surrounded the city of Jerusalem on the east and southeast sides. This valley had a dark history. Seven hundred years before Christ, the evil King Ahaz set up pagan shrines in the valley and made sacrifices there, burnt offerings it was said, of children. His grandson Manasseh continued this heinous practice was resumed by. The prophet Isaiah called the valley Topheth "the burning place" and said it would be here, in this unholy gorge that those who rebelled against God would find judgement, where "their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." Their successor, the good King Josiah, tore down the shrines and put an end to the sacrifices. But the image of Gehenna, worms and fire remained in the minds of the Jewish people, emblematic of God's judgment, such that Jesus can quote Isaiah's words centuries later and everyone knew what he was talking about.

Though Jesus isn't very explicit about hell, judging from this imagery, it's pretty clear, hell is not a place you want to go. Indeed, Jesus here urges his followers, in the strongest, most vivid terms possible, to do all they can to *stay clear* of hell.

Now, another preacher might see this as an opportunity to expand on Jesus' warning, to fill out the picture, to tell you exactly what hell is like and how horrible it is and what sins will land you there. You can rest easy—I'm not going to do that. I appreciate the wisdom that: "you can scare people out of hell, but you can't scare them into heaven."

More than that, though, what I want to suggest this morning is that hell is not just something to scare people with. Hell is, in fact, good news. I know that seems strange to say, but hell *is* good news, when seen from a proper perspective. You see, hell is just the flipside of a coin, the reverse side of a truth that really is positive. For the existence of hell means our lives, how we live, our choices, what we do or don't do, matters, matters immensely. Hell means our lives are of great importance, *eternal* importance.

You see, if hell didn't exist, if there was no consequence for our behavior, then our lives, our decisions, our actions would be of no importance. We could do whatever we wanted, help whomever, hurt whomever and it wouldn't matter in the end. But what Jesus came to teach us, one of the things he wanted us to understand, is that our lives do matter, we matter and what we do with our lives matters.

We see this played out with the disciples. In Mark's Gospel especially, Jesus' followers are portrayed as a clueless, slow-minded group of screw-ups who are forever missing the point. And yet Jesus affirms that their behavior, their choices are of great importance, so much so that if they trip up, if they find themselves slipping into sin, they need to take drastic action—whatever is causing the sin, they need to get rid of it—cut it off or cut it out. Jesus is deadly serious about it. For as great as their successes might be, equally disastrous would their failures be.

A colleague of mine tells the story of picking up his child at kindergarten. The children had been working in clay, fashioning a variety of little bowls and artifacts. His daughter emerged bearing her little creation in her hands. In her eagerness to present it to her father, she ran toward him and tripped on the sidewalk. Her artwork went flying and broke into a dozen pieces. She was heartbroken and began to wail. The teacher ran to comfort her saying, "That's all right. Don't cry. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter." Through her tears, his little daughter protested, "But it does matter. It does matter." My colleague remarked that his daughter showed greater wisdom than her teacher. She had made a gift with her own hands, an offering that she was proudly presenting to her dad. She knew that what she had made would delight him. And she was full of delight in anticipation of presenting her creation. To her, it wasn't just a bunch of dry clay broken to bits. It was a treasured creation, an offering in love. It mattered.

It's the same with us and our lives. You and I are busy fashioning our lives under the watchful eye of God. And we are bold to think of our lives as our creative offering to God. God has provided all the materials for this, and, in our daily choices and the way we live, we are busy fashioning our lives in gratitude to the God who gave us life. And if we trip up and make a wreck of our lives, it matters, it matters a great deal.

Now, that doesn't mean that we are defined by any given choice or series of choices, that once we start down a path, we have to stay on it. As Christians, we know a loving God, a God who forgives us for our bad decisions and wrong choices. Because God forgives, we don't have to carry the burden of our bad decisions. We are not condemned to forever shoulder the weight of our mistakes.

And yet to be forgiven does not mean that our mistakes don't matter. As Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, pointed out, God forgives our mistakes but he doesn't make it so that our mistakes never happened. He can't change the past or erase our sins. Life is not a video game you can simply reboot whenever you make a mistake. Rather, what God does is he makes it so that when we fail, our failure doesn't define us. What this means is that, even though hell is a real place, no one *has* to go there.

Knowing that, we can live our lives with boldness and freedom. Even when things don't work out as we planned, even when the choices we make with the very best of intentions do not work out as we thought they would, we can know that, through Jesus, we can change. That knowledge can free us from the fear that our failures have power over our future, that we are destined for disaster.

For at least 20 years, alcohol dominated Jeff's life. Because of it, he had lost multiple jobs, and lost his marriage and family as well. He had tried a number of treatment programs, but could never free himself from its grip.

During one of his bouts, his pastor came over to commiserate with him and pray with him. Jeff looked over at a half empty bottle of whiskey and confessed, "Preacher, it's hell for me to admit that that bottle controls my life. I love my wife, and my kids, but I love what's in that bottle even more. It's pitiful. It's hell."

Some years later, that pastor ran into Jeff on the street. He was frankly surprised that Jeff was still alive, considering how bad Jeff's addiction had been. After some small talk, Jeff came to the question the pastor was too polite to ask, "Preacher, I'm glad that we both lived long enough for you to see me clean. I have been sober for the last five years. Praise God." What happened? What was the source of this miraculous change? Jeff explained, "It was like I had a kind of religious experience. In a moment, I saw what a gift my life was. In an instant, I no longer wanted to waste my time, to throw my life away. I saw what a gift it was God had given me, just to be able to get up in the morning and go to work. I decided not to throw away what had been given to me. What a treasure my life was! I've been sober ever since."

Quite an amazing transformation. Truly miraculous. This man had seen hell, and not just seen it, lived it! But he realized his life, the gift he had been given, was worth keeping. God, he confessed, got ahold of him and awakened Jeff to the giftedness of his life, revealing to him the treasure he been given.

I know, hell, the way most of us look at it, can seem like a great threat looming over our lives. But another way to see it, the way I like to look at it, is to see it as an affirmation of the

importance of our lives, of the decisions we make, the paths we take. As I said, if there were no consequences for our actions, then they would have no meaning. We could do whatever we want to whomever we want, and it wouldn't matter. But God has created us, given us an important role in his creation, one with great possibilities, but also grave consequences when we waste the gifts God has given us. Such is the "good news" of hell. Thanks be to God!