

## ***Hell? No.***

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*Many of us don't believe in hell, eternal fire, or the devil... In fact, I find the idea of hell morally repugnant, since it makes fear the basis of faith. —Rita Nakashima Brock*

Ancient Witness: Luke 12:4-5  
Luke 4:16-20a

Halloween is coming in few days, and I am reminded of how some years ago when I received a phone call from a woman, and I could hear the distress in her voice. She told me that she was upset and didn't know whom to call. She had been listening to a local Christian radio station and heard an ad for something called "Hell House." Hell House was a project of Kings Point Church of God, a conservative congregation north of Cincinnati.

Now one must understand that Halloween is a holiday that is distasteful to many conservative Christians. They are offended by all playful talk of witches, hobgoblins, ghosts and spirits. So, often they attempt to Christianize Halloween. Things like Hell House are the result.

The woman, who described herself as a conservative evangelical Christian, said that the ad depicted a scene in hell of the funeral of a gay man who died of AIDS. She was so offended by the mean-spiritedness of the ad that she called WNLT and protested. And she called me at my church because she still needed to talk. So we talked.

Later, I read a newspaper article in which the pastor of the church defended Hell House by saying it merely depicts the effects of sin with its vignettes of hell. "We are not saying all homosexuals with AIDS die in hell," said the pastor, only those who have "not repented their sins." (Gee, that makes me feel better!) Some of the other scenes include a young woman who has had an abortion, a teen who has committed suicide (can you imagine hearing this as a parent of one such teen?), and a drug overdose at a party. What this particular church had done, it appeared to me, was **while they had made sure their children did not wear Frankenstein masks or costumes of Dracula, they had dressed up God as a monster!** No wonder, I thought, people are rejecting Christianity.

But friends, the church, in general, has tended to do this for years. With its teachings about hell, the church has turned the teachings of Jesus upside down, turning the God of love into a God of cruelty. And those gentle souls who challenged this harsh portrayal of God were, themselves, banished to the "outer darkness."

For example, the Synod of Constantinople (543 C.E.) damned Origen, one of the early church "fathers," 300 years after he died because he denied the eternity of infernal punishment. He was banished to hell because he did not believe in hell!

Perhaps one of the most influential of the church fathers, Augustine, took the doctrine of damnation to dizzying new heights. He wrote, “the majority of humans will not be among the blessed” but destined for eternal damnation. Even unbaptized children must endure the fire of hell, he wrote, “even though in a less painful fashion than those who have heaped personal sins on themselves.” One of Augustine’s most intelligent opponents was Bishop Julian of Eclanum who called the God of Augustine a “persecutor of the newborn, who throws tiny babies into the eternal flames.” It was Julian, however, who was declared to be a heretic!

Coincidentally, this doctrine of eternal damnation provided a strong tool of social control for those who were interested in maintaining the status quo. Why worry about reforming society when one faces either eternal heavenly reward or punishment in hell? Why work for freedom and justice when you can have “pie in the sky by and by”?

And so from the very beginning, the church found that this doctrine was useful to keep the rabble in line. And the early Christian community began by turning Jesus himself into a preacher of hellfire. The first text this morning has Jesus saying, “Fear the one who has the power to cast you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear that one!” (Luke 12:5)

Scholars think that these out-of-character words were not the actual words of Jesus, but words of some later editor of Luke’s gospel. And then these words of punishment are followed immediately by verses that stress the tender love of God.

So where does the idea of hell as an eternal punishment of sinners come from? Well, this idea is found nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the ancient view of things, the world existed in three layers: the earth was flat and was located directly beneath the sky or firmament, in which the stars and the moon hung like ornaments from a ceiling. The third tier was located beneath the earth, the underworld. In Hebrew this was called Sheol (Hades in Greek).

Sheol was not an evil kingdom or place of punishment for just some of the people. It was the silent realm of all the dead without exception. It wouldn’t be much later the Sheol would be transformed into a house of horrors. It was merely where the dead reside and take their last rest.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. the character of Sheol began to change. During the Maccabean wars for Jewish independence from an oppressive Roman occupation, heaven first came into view for all those brave martyrs who fought and died in the struggle. The realm of the dead was degraded to the place for nonheroes and civilians. It didn’t take long for this division to become a moral division between good and evil. This led to a concept of Sheol as a kind of way station, a waiting room of sorts. Sheol now has two sections: for the good and just, it is a pleasant stopping point; for the godless, there is a section of interim punishment until the final judgment, after which the punishment would become eternal. This was the prevalent view at the time of Jesus, and it was reflected in Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus who *both* went to Hades, but in different sections.

Later, a second place popped up alongside Sheol. It was the valley of “Gehenna” in the Greek. This notorious valley to the south of Jerusalem was also called the Valley of Fire. It received its reputation from child sacrifices offered to the god, Molech. The ravine became a trash dump where unburied corpses were incinerated by a continuous fire. It was a literal place that

became an image, a metaphor for being separated from God, the worst possible place. So in the New Testament, Sheol and Gehenna remained side by side. Sheol was the transitional place and Gehenna became Hell, the ultimate place of punishment of the wicked. Over time, Gehenna slowly took the place of Sheol, and Hell became the dark and fiery kingdom of the dead.

Of course, today none of us really believe in hell as the ancient world did, as a literal place under the flat earth or a literal valley of fire near Jerusalem. So how did Jesus fit into this worldview? The second passage from Luke this morning is a stark contrast with the first:

*And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah.*

In Jesus' day, the Jewish synagogue service was divided into two parts. First the reading from Scripture, when everyone stood, and second the sermon, when everyone sat down. Now the reading from the prophets, unlike the reading from the Pentateuch, was not prescribed. So that meant that the reader, Jesus, chose the text himself. And he chose this part:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

Now what I want you to see is that Jesus breaks off in the middle of Isaiah's sentence, which continues, "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). Jesus omitted the talk of threats and punishment of the prophet! It says that the people "were stunned at the *gracious words* that came from his mouth." Instead of punishment and vengeance, grace! Jesus had a very complicated relationship with his own tradition, as we should, too, it seems to me.

In another scene Jesus again neglects to speak of revenge and retribution:

*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me. (Matt. 11:2-6, Luke 7:22-23)*

Again, Jesus is quoting from Isaiah (29:18-19, 35:3-4), and again Jesus omits words of revenge "And all who do evil shall be cut off" (Isaiah 29:20) and "Behold your God will come with vengeance" (Isaiah 35:4). My point is that Jesus was no preacher of hellfire. Jesus spoke a message of God's love with words of grace. Jesus very deliberately broke the linkage in his tradition between God and violence.

So I find the words of John Murray, who founded the universalism movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to be very much in the spirit of Jesus:

*Go out in to the highways and byways.  
Give the people something of your new vision...*

*Give them not hell, but hope and courage;  
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.*

I would agree with theologian, Rita Nakashima Brock, who said,

*Many of us don't believe in hell, eternal fire, or the devil... In fact, I find the idea of hell morally repugnant, since it makes fear the basis of faith.*

I'm convinced that God does not motivate with fear. My heart resonates with the ancient witness who wrote, "God is love," and "Perfect love casts out fear." No one ever becomes more holy through fear.

For me, I cannot reconcile hell with my personal experience of a God that is all-loving. But ultimately we each need to make our own decision on such matters. Each generation, each person, has to search, discover and use one's own words to describe what it means to experience and to follow God. And ours is a congregation where we have the freedom and are encouraged to do just that. I am thankful for this.

As the popular saying goes, "What would Jesus do?" Would Jesus condone Hell House? Absolutely not! This is not the God of Jesus. God's house is ultimately a house not of fear but peace, not of torment but healing and wholeness. Hell as a place of God's punishment does not exist. Hell cannot coexist with God's love we see in Jesus.

Of course, actions have consequences. Evil has its negative effects. Things we do or don't do can hurt ourselves or others. There is a real sense that when we depart from God's wisdom we live in "the land of the dead." If we must speak of hell it should be metaphorical. I once heard William Sloane Coffin talk about Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel, *The Last Judgment*, in which a man is being dragged down to hell by demons,

*One hand over one eye and in the other eye a look of dire recognition. He understood, but too late. It's a familiar story, isn't it? Rarely do we see the truth that stares us in the face until it hits us in the face... Michelangelo was right: hell is truth seen too late.*

The phrase, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" might describe the personal anguish of realizing how things could have been different. In the words of the poet:

*Of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"* (Whittier)

But my friends, this kind of hell is not by the design of God. This kind of hell is not an act of punishment by God. While it is often the result of human actions or fate, it is not the result of God's will. This kind of hell is not eternal. This kind of hell is never the last word. The last words—the eternal words—are always words of grace and love.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*