

Heaven and Hell – Psalm 139:7-13 – July 12, 2009

About a month and an half ago I received the following email: I would like for you to talk about where we go when we die. I have always puzzled over that idea. I have always thought it was confusing. When you die do you go to a huge kingdom? Do we keep on growing in heaven? I think we do. Do I have to be the best person I can possibly be to get into heaven? It says hell's gates will be huge and heaven's gates will be tiny, but what does this mean?

Great questions wouldn't you agree – especially when you realize they came to me from one of our nine year olds – although very soon to be ten. Oddly enough that very same week, I was asked by an adult to address the topic of hell. As much as I might like to avoid this as a topic all together – something I have basically done in my preaching until this morning – two requests in one week is enough to convince me. So let's begin with the hot, burning issue of hell. Sorry I couldn't resist.

To be completely honest right from the get-go, I struggle with the concept of hell. I have heard or read too many sermons that use hell only as a threat and scare tactic to terrify people into believing in God. There is no shortage of pictures depicting hell as a place where a curly-tailed, pointy-eared Satan holds a pitchfork over a bunch of sea monster-looking people like some low budget science fiction film. There is no scarier place than the hell depicted by some preachers. And naturally their depiction of heaven is just the opposite and yet the only other reason to believe in God. In my humble opinion, if a person's primary motivation in life is to avoid eternal punishment or to win eternal bliss, then every act of that person – including acts of kindness and generosity –

become acts of self interest. Too often, hell and heaven are used to scare and manipulate people and I do not find that helpful.

Unfortunately, when it comes to heaven and hell, there is so much we just do not know - mostly because so much of the biblical language used to describe these ideas is metaphorical. It is so much outside the realm of human experience actual descriptions are limited. Now granted there are the occasional books like 90 Minutes in Heaven by Don Piper and 23 Minutes in Hell by Bill Wiese – admittedly neither of which I have read and probably never will – although I know some of you have. In all honesty, the scriptures are confusing enough for me.

There are at least 100 passages of scripture dealing with punishment in the afterlife but there is no consistent picture of hell. In the Old Testament, the words used to describe it are very often synonymous with the words used to describe death. Sometimes they mean death itself, sometimes the place of the dead, and sometimes a place set apart for the punishment of the dead.

The most common word for hell in the Hebrew Bible is Sheol which simply means the “place of the dead.” But the concept of eternal punishment does not occur in the Old Testament. Sheol instead designates a bleak subterranean region where the dead, good and bad alike, subsist only as impotent shadows. And yet hell is also called the Pit or the Depths – thus paving the way for the New Testament writers to adopt the concept of Hades which is the Greek term for Sheol. Most of you probably remember from your study of Greek and Roman mythology that Hades was the God of the underworld.

Undoubtedly, the early church wanted to re-interpret the concept of hell which they did in vivid and unique ways after the death of Jesus. But unfortunately, much of that happened via art and literature and not so much through the scriptures. I suspect I simply need to say Dante's Inferno to explain what I mean. Dante's portrayal of hell from the early 1300's is one of the most vivid depictions we have. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this work, Dante describes a visit into the realm of the dead and his first destination was the Inferno of hell. This image from the Divine Comedy remains with us today and it is horrifying. A sign as you enter says, "Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here." It is a vivid and frightening vision into Dante's idea of hell.

In more modern times, theologians have defined hell as total estrangement from God. Hell is the condition of being stuck in our sorrows, with no relief in sight. It is a condition in which you long to be loved but nobody does; you long for light but there is utter darkness. It is a place of eternal regret and lack of acceptance and peace. The English Philosopher Thomas Hobbs summed it when he wrote: "Hell is truth seen too late."

But what did Jesus believe? In the gospel of Matthew he describes hell as a place of outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the 25th chapter, he talks about hell as a place of eternal fire, a place of everlasting punishment, a place without the presence of God. I don't know about you but that scares me even more than Satan with a pitchfork and horns. I cannot imagine a place without God. It would be a place of utter despair. I cannot be certain of Jesus' intentions but I personally believe he describes this hopeless state of being in an attempt to inspire his followers to live their lives in a certain way. Simply put, Jesus used hell to motivate his

followers to believe in God – to obey God’s commandments and live ethical, moral lives. Not to scare the hell out of them???

His most chilling description is once again found in Matthew 25 where he says: You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

I actually used this scripture in my Epworth Camp class and told the kids as I will tell you that I struggle with this text. And yet, it is hard to ignore that Jesus suggests that hell is a condition reserved for the selfish, the greedy, or those without compassion. In other words, hell is a state of being in the afterlife based upon our own choices in this life.

Now some would say that the only hell you will ever experience is found on earth. Of course, we all know those who experience that. Hell is watching your child die of starvation. Hell is watching people you love destroy themselves. Hell is humiliation and defeat so profound you want to die. Unfortunately, eventually we all experience some form of hell on earth - that sense of regret, hopelessness, estrangement – being shut off from God. Because we know what it feels like to some degree, our experience of hell on

earth can and should motivate us to ease the suffering of everyone we meet so that eventually they might even know a little of heaven on earth as well.

So how about we move on to that much more pleasant subject. The Bible mentions heaven frequently as well but once again does not describe it in great detail. The exception is the book of Revelation which offers a mystical and fanciful vision of heaven to say the least. The 21st chapter talks about seven angels and seven bowls filled with plagues, walls 14 hundred miles high, wide and long and streets paved with gold. No wonder our nine year old requestor mentions the idea of a huge kingdom.

But once again, I believe that this description is much more metaphorical than it is literal. Basically I believe that the biblical authors are trying to say that heaven is better than we could ever imagine. The author in Revelation is writing the most fanciful description possible to suggest that it is beyond words. Any description would fall short of reality. Paul probably summed it up best when he said no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9)

I believe in the idea of heaven for several reasons. First of all, I do believe that we are blessed to have momentary glimpses of heaven on earth as well. You know what I am talking about – those moments when heaven breaks into your life and you experience pure goodness and beauty. I believe that when we truly worship and praise God, the line between heaven and earth is very thin. We are closer to heaven when we are worshipping God than at any other time. There is a spiritual power in sacred spaces and places – where it is easier to connect with spiritual realities. That is why I believe church camp is so amazing and special to many.

And the same happens in our personal lives as well. I trust that each of you has had those times when everything is so good you cannot even absorb all the blessings in your life. When you fall in love, a child or a grandchild is born, you accomplish or experience something wonderful, you do something completely unselfish and kind that makes a lasting difference in someone's life – like on a mission trip – and you just know what heaven is like. I truly believe that experiences like that give us a momentary taste of exactly what heaven is like.

Would Jesus agree? I think so. Jesus reveals the most to us about heaven in John 14 where he describes a place of many rooms that he has prepared for us. Unfortunately, here too he does not go into a lot of detail. But he does talk about it as a vision for our future – a place where we are headed and where we are assured he will be.

More than anything else, I believe the concepts of heaven and hell remind us that our thoughts, actions and decisions in this life matter. They serve as reminders to live lives of purpose and ultimate meaning. They remind us that we begin working toward eternity right here, right now. They are not ideas meant to obsess us with rewards and punishments, or to analyze every action in light of our own selfishness. They are to shed light upon the importance of living generous, compassionate, and ethical lives.

One day we will all know precisely what happens when we die but unfortunately in the meantime there is no way that human knowledge can penetrate this ultimate mystery. (Sorry Sam!!!) Only religious arrogance could suggest otherwise. I also believe that only religious arrogance would suggest that Christians alone will end up in heaven. Jesus did say that no one comes to God but by me. Yet he also said I have other sheep

not of this fold and in God's house there are many rooms. Fortunately for me and you I hope as well, the United Methodist church does not believe that non-Christians will automatically end up in hell. We would never presume to know such a thing and I for one am horrified when I hear that. God in God's infinite mercy knows what will happen to us in the afterlife. In the meantime, we do the best that we can and leave the rest up to God. So when I think of heaven and hell, I think primarily of God's endless mercy. I know that in God's mercy there is hope for us all.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. That is good enough for me and I pray for each and every one of you as well. Amen.