

“He descended into hell.”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard
Apostles Creed Series- Feb 26, 2006

Psalm 139:8-9

“Whither shall I go from thee?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!”

1 Peter 3:18-22:

“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved, through water.”

William Safire writes a weekend column in the New York Times Magazine about language. A few weeks ago his column was titled, “Tarnation and Heck! The new gentility of cussing.” Safire says that while many publications are printing four letter words, others are resisting the trend and reverting to days when euphemisms were used for cuss words. He notes that President Bush, raised as I was in a family where swearing was a big no-no, uses darn and heck quite frequently. The President, known for interesting liberties with English language, uses heck to describe a person, place or thing or to have a drink. Heck, of course is an euphemism for the less acceptable word “hell” . . . Another euphemism for where the eternally darned reside is Tarnation. A Times editorial questioning the failure of NY state legislature to put new voting systems in place, the same challenge facing Maryland, wrote, “What in tarnation are those people doing? “

Calvin Coolidge, a man of few words, but very religious, was asked by his wife after returning from church what the sermon was about. Calvin said, “ sin.” “ Well what did he say about it? He pressed. “ He's against it,” replied the reticent President.

If you have a bedside Baptist who did not come with you to church this morning, and you are asked what the sermon is about, you can be as succinct as Cal.
“What was the sermon about?” Hell.
“What did the preacher say about it?” Jesus went there!

“He descended into hell,” is the most controversial part of the Apostles' Creed. The Creed went through several stages of development. And the phrase, “descended into hell,” was a late addition. The phrase's weak scriptural support, its mythic cosmology, and a strange history of interpretation all have conspired to unite both conservatives and liberals in a perennial cause to excise it from the creed. If not for John Calvin writing in his influential “Institutes of the Christian Religion” that this was “central to our understanding of salvation,” it might not have survived to modern times.

The placement of the “descent into hell” has also caused alarms. Coming in the middle of the list of important events in the life of Jesus...”*conceived by Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and was buried* **(all familiar events with clear gospel**

reference) -then- he, Jesus *descended into hell*, before completing the grave to the empty tomb journey, *on the third day he arose again from the dead, ascended to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God.*

It doesn't seem to fit.

Many Christian denomination hymnals or prayer books that people use to recite this have replaced it with the less daunting, “descended to the dead,” while others just leave it out!

Seminary professor and pastor Sarah Johnston told of being approached by a veteran and stalwart member of her church after Sunday school in a manner that reminded her of the aversion of this phrase in the creed. Looking in her eye, the stalwart said, “MY Jesus did not descend to hell.” He went on to say that in the past 40 years of going to worship when this part of the creed was read he just remained silent. His rationale for 4 decades of silence: “*God would not send Jesus to the torment reserved for the Hitlers of this world.*”

Members of churches I have served have told me emphatically, “*Hell is a place that **my** Jesus wouldn't go!*”

So OKAY---lets examine it a bit. There are two words that are translated “Hell”. The first is Sheol, which is Hebrew for “**the place of the dead.**” It is cryptically depicted in the OT as a dark, lower place where the dead linger as shadows of their former selves, cut off from the living. **Psalm 139** which gives thanksgiving for the omnipresence of God, says—“**even if one descend to Sheol, God is there!**”

Sheol functions like “Hades” in Greek mythology. To claim that Jesus descended to the place of the dead was nothing unusual. The very human Jesus was just following humanity's descent into death. Sheol was for Jesus, just a short way station to the big news of Easter, when “on the third day he rose again.”

There is a second image of hell in literature and scripture. The word **Gehenna . . . literally the valley of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem where fiery human sacrifices were once offered under apostate kings.** It was so heinous that the prophet Jeremiah used it as a term describing the fiery, divine judgment that eventually awaited the truly wicked. Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke all make references of punishment awaiting people in Gehenna.

With these two clear words and meanings for hell in the Bible, it was always a challenge to relate the respective traditions of Sheol—an abiding place of the dead, and Gehenna, the place of divine punishment, and then connect them to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

It took some careful explaining to do. Not surprisingly, Thomas Aquinas, who could explain the most irreconcilable issues in theology and psychology, managed to do it pretty well. The descent into hell is defining death as the **separation** of the **body** from the **soul**. **Aquinas's** then connects Jesus' descent to the place of the Dead to another phrase to be examined in a few weeks, “the communion of the saints.”

“*The descent into hell extends the salvation of the cross and resurrection backwards in time to those who could only greet it from afar in anticipation of the fulfillment to come.*”

In other words, Jesus had to go save the righteous who departed before he was resurrected. Thomas also acknowledged that Jesus descended to prove he was triumphant over the Devil, the resident landlord in Hell

The sole New Testament mention of the descent into hell in context to Jesus' cross and resurrection is found in I Peter 3: 18 and following. In explaining Christ's purpose for descending to the underworld, Jesus after he dies descends in spirit to make proclamation to the “**spirits in prison**—specifically to the wicked from the time of Noah, those who did not obey God and were destroyed in the flood. Peter has Jesus going to preach the gospel to those so wicked that an angry God once thought they were worthy of destruction.

James Kay of Princeton Seminary summarizes this to mean, “the descent is the place in the Creed where the dead and the damned encounter their Savior and Lord. It is a powerful statement about Jesus' desire to bring good news to the damned.”

How does this speak to you?

You don't come to church to hear about who the Jebusites and the Hittites are. You probably don't come to learn the derivation of Hebrew and Greek words. Why should the phrase still matter to us?

Well, I admit I had trouble finding the answer. The light came on at 6AM Thursday morning when the Post arrived. It was one of those bad news days—in a time when it seems like everyday is a bad news day. On page one, left column. We read that a bomb blew off the dome of the most Holy Shiite Mosque in Iraq. This heinous act, presumably in an attempt to start a civil war between Muslim factions, incited widespread rioting. I immediately said to myself, there must be a special place in hell for people who want to incite a horrible civil war in Iraq.

On page one, right column, we read about the revenge killings in Nigeria by Christian mobs retaliating from Muslim mobs rampaging through Christian communities killing Christians because a Danish newspaper printed an unflattering cartoon against Mohamed.

When I opened the fold to the Metro section it didn't improve. The QB of Navy football team charged with raping a female midshipman. Then pictures and a story of 2 people who died at Bowie's Freeway Airport while attempting to land in the heavy fog.

Then the light went on: Even in the darkest hour, when forces of evil conspired to kill him, Jesus descended to the place of the dead to bring salvation and hope. The descent into Hell is a reminder that Jesus offers salvation to everyone. This is a bold affirmation that Jesus is the God's universal offer of salvation to the whole world. No one is outside the reach of God's love.

It has been suggested that television show host Oprah Winfrey operates America's largest church. Her 10 million daily viewers see her daily “grace notes” that cover Christian themes like generosity and forgiveness. Without preaching, Oprah lets her guests tell the stories of grace and hope. Her April 22, 2002 show was titled, “Incredible stories of Forgiveness.” Her guests were Chip and Jody Ferlaak, whose 4-year-old daughter was killed by a suicidal driver. They also included Sharmeta Lovely, who was severely injured in a beating from an attacker who also killed her boyfriend. When she was 12, Leslie Douglass was assaulted by 2 men who invaded her family's home and shot her, her brother, and their parents. Her parents died. Leslie was on the program too.

Oprah welcomes the guest . . . introduces the theme and tells the viewers they will be moved by the stories they will hear. “For many of us, the criminals who committed these horrible acts would be beyond forgiveness but today you're going to witness some of the most incredible stories ever of what most people could never get over.”

After the break when Ms. Lovely finished sharing her story of forgiveness; a moving account of confronting and forgiving her attacker, Oprah addresses the audience.

“I don't know about you, but I am better for hearing these stories.”

Maybe you will still want to mumble over these words the next time we recite the Creed.

But after close examination, I hope you see that it succinctly expresses what the Apostle Paul so boldly declared in Romans 8 “that NOTHING in all of creation can separate us from the love of God we know in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus, fresh from the horrors of the cross, forsaken even by God during those harrowing last moments, goes to the depths of depravity to redeem the lost.

If God is willing to send his Son to the cross and then from the cross to the place where all the unrepentant sinners reside in an effort to reach them with the **good news of salvation**---just think how far he wants to go to save me!