

He Descended into Hell

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Matthew 27:32-50

Tonight I'm preaching a catechism sermon on the article of the creed which talks about Jesus descending into hell. I'm doing that on World communion Sunday, the Sunday when we think about how the ancient walls between races and tribes are broken down by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Those two things may seem like they have nothing to do with each other, but I'm bringing them together on purpose. World Communion Sunday is a good day to think about Jesus' descent into hell and tonight I'd like to explain to you why that's so. Let me do that by first saying a little bit about communion, and then a little bit about how we understand Jesus' descent into hell.

World communion Sunday is a day when we think about the walls that still divide people. Jesus came to break down these walls of division and bring people together in Him. But there are still lots of walls. You see these walls on multiple fronts. You have the large-scale, geopolitical breaks in communion: Things like the hatred that simmers between Palestinians and Jews, a hatred that still sees people dying in clashes in the Gaza strip. Things like the continuing divide of race in this country. Things like the carnage in Syria, where greed and hatred and ambition have led to the slaughter of children, the use of chemical weapons and the flood of refugees. There are places all over the world where communion is shattered by ancient hatreds. You also have smaller domestic walls. There are barriers to communion in our kitchens and family rooms. Marriages that fall apart despite the fact that everyone wants them to work. Husband, wife, children, extended family, all of them say they want communion again, but they can't seem to break down the barriers and make things work. And more intimate still, you can have walls inside yourself. I'm thinking of things like shame and loneliness. People can become so embarrassed by their failure or their weakness that they can't look at themselves in the mirror without feeling disappointment and regret. So those are the walls that face us on a world communion Sunday. It's everything from the rage of nations to the private shame of a middle aged man. The walls are everywhere. They are thick and they are miserable.

Ok that's the communion side of things. What about Jesus descent into hell? What do we believe about that and how does it relate? When we profess that Jesus descended into hell, what are we saying? In the Reformed tradition, we are not saying that Jesus went to a place. In our tradition, when we say Jesus descended into hell, we don't mean to say, first of all, that Jesus went to Satan's fiery realm. There are some Christian traditions who do believe something like that. The Catholics, the Orthodox traditions, and even some Protestant traditions say something like this. The Catholics for example say that Jesus went into hell after his death so that he could show his power over it and release those worthy folk who died before Christ. Here's how the Catholic catechism puts it: *"In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him."* The belief is sometimes referred to as the harrowing of hell, and these churches don't just make it up out of thin air; they point to a couple of Biblical passages to support for this belief. Ephesians 4:9 which talks about Jesus descending to the "lower earthly regions." And 1 Peter 3:18-22 – a really difficult text which seems to say that after his death Jesus went to preach to the *"imprisoned Spirits... who were disobedient long ago."* It's also a belief that shows up in their

liturgical practice. In the Orthodox Church, on Holy Saturday (the day between Good Friday and Easter) they have a special worship service. At that worship service there is a point in the liturgy where the priest says “Arise O Lord!” and immediately the congregation starts making noise. They bang on pews, they stomp their feet, they even bring pots and pans and clang them together. This noise is meant to re-enact the sound of Jesus going through hell and smashing open the doors of the cells holding his people. It’s meant to re-enact the sound of Jesus harrowing hell. Now, I’m not going to spend much time talking about the validity of this interpretation of the descent into hell. John Calvin rejected it. He thought it was a false belief. Philip Melancthon, the Lutheran reformer thought it was a true belief. It’s definitely a belief worth studying, but I’m not going to do that here.

When we talk about the descent into hell, the primary emphasis of scripture and the primary emphasis of our tradition is not on Jesus’ descending into a physical place; it’s about Jesus descending to a spiritual/emotional condition. When we say Jesus descended into hell we meant to say that Jesus suffered all the pain and torture and torment of hell. You see that in the catechism. The catechism asks the question: “*Why does the creed add, “He descended into hell?”*” The answer: “*To assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.*” It is in the anguish, terror and pain of soul that Jesus suffered on the cross that we see him descending into hell. The hell is in the pain and the anguish. You see the same thing in Calvin. Calvin says that when Christ descended into hell “*he paid the price of suffering in his soul, the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.*” And for Calvin the torment came from the fact that Jesus felt himself utterly abandoned by God. For Calvin that is the true torture of hell. “*And surely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God; and when you call upon him not to be heard. It is as if God himself had plotted your ruin*” Just to be clear, Calvin didn’t think that Jesus was actually forsaken by God (like the trinity broke apart for a couple of days). No, Calvin thought that Jesus felt as though he was utterly abandoned by God. And that’s hell. That feeling of being completely separated from God, that feeling of being in a place where goodness is gone, and light is gone and friendship is gone, and faith is gone and love is gone. That is what it’s like to be in hell.

Calvin’s view is well-supported by the gospel accounts of the crucifixion. Abandonment, the loss of communion is at the center of the pain Jesus experiences on the cross. Did you notice how in our Scripture passage almost no emphasis is put on Jesus physical suffering? There is no long description of how it felt when the nails went in. There is no graphic account of Jesus’ pain as he hung there. In fact, the announcement of the physical crucifixion is almost perfunctory. “When they crucified him...” says Matthew. It’s a subordinate clause. What is emphasized is the emotional spiritual pain. The mocking. The ridicule. The rejection. The abandonment. Jesus is betrayed by one of his disciples. Then he is abandoned by the rest of his closest friends, who run from him in his time of need. The public, who used to cheer him and crowd around him, they turn on him. They heap insults on him and cover him with shame. Creation abandons him – the sun hides its face and the world goes dark. Then finally he feels as though his own heavenly Father has broken off communion: “my God my God, why have you forsaken me.” Here we begin to see how the breaking of communion and the descent into hell come together. Of all the terrors, of all the anguish that Jesus suffered on the cross, what was the worst anguish, what was the most terrible? Was it the nails? Was it the beatings? Was it the 39 lashes? Or was it the utter abandonment? Was it the fact that he was completely and utterly alone? Based on the way the

Bible tells the story, and based on Jesus' own cry, I'm pretty sure it was the break of communion, the utter isolation that was the worst thing.

That fits our own experience of pain. When I was in 7th grade I got into a fight with Roger Dennis. I accidentally wrecked his art project in school. I lifted it up to look at it and it fell apart because he hadn't finished gluing it together. He came looking for me on the playground after school and he said he was going to fight me because of what I'd done. It was a lame fight. We spent 5 minutes circling each other with our fists up. We would swing wildly at each other, but neither of us ever landed a clean punch. Neither of us were really hurt at all. Later a teacher came and broke it up and it was over. On the way home I cried like a baby, not because of any bruise, but because of the anger that had been between us, because of the wall that had come between us, because of the people who had been cheering for him to get me when we fought. There is no pain quite like the pain of separation. What is hell? Hell is the complete destruction of all communion. Hell is separation from God. Hell is separation from other human beings. Hell is separation from ourselves – it's the complete breakdown of communion.

Jesus descended into Hell. Now we begin to sense why Jesus' descent into hell is good news. Jesus goes down into the darkest human places so that we know that even in those places we are not alone, we are not abandoned. He descended into hell, Jesus goes to the streets of Aleppo, Syria while the bombs fall and the traumatized children shake in fear. He descended into hell, Jesus goes to the kitchen of the abused spouse alone in her terror, unable to reveal her secret to anyone. He descended into hell. Jesus goes to the bedroom of the middle-aged man who's pinned under his bedcovers by a smothering mix of depression and anxiety. He descended into hell. Jesus goes down into the loneliness of the bereaved widow, who feels her loss so acutely, she doesn't know how she will ever find hope and happiness again. He descends into our hell, and when he does, he grabs hold of us with a hold that is both gentle and unbreakable. He shows us his wounds, terrible mortal wounds. They are the wounds of a man who has been through hell. And he says to us: *"Do not be afraid, I know that you are in a terrible place today. And I know that tomorrow you may still be in that terrible place. The same with the day after that. But listen to me! Trust me! Your road will not end in this darkness; your road ends with me in the light. Your road ends in light and love and a communion. I know. I've walked it. Take my hand and I'll show you the way."* There is enormous comfort in this article of the creed. And there is also a suggestion for the shape of our life. As servants of the man who descended into hell to break down the walls of loneliness and abandonment that isolate and divide people, we become people who are determined to confront these same walls.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam talks about two different kinds of relationships: Bonding relationships and bridging relationships. Bonding relationships are relationships we form with people who are like us or who have similar interests. I like basketball, my next door neighbor likes basketball, and we bond. I like bagpipe music, you like bagpipe music, we bond. Bridging relationships are different. In a bridging relationship a connection is built over differences. In a bridging relationship there are walls of separation between us but a special effort is made to bridge those walls. A middle class Christian Reformed person works on a friendship with her Muslim neighbor and she forges a bridging relationship. A Palestinian works on a friendship with a Jewish neighbor and he forms a bridging relationship. A popular high school student makes an effort to befriend and include a lonely outsider. She forms a bridging relationship. Bonding relationships are fine. Nothing wrong with bonding relationships. They are important. They give strength. But bridging relationships are better. Bridging relationships not only protect us from the hell of separation, they send hell into retreat. They

break down the walls. They destroy the powers of separation. Most of us have bonding relationships in our life. I hope we all have some bridging relationships too.

Praise be to our Lord, Jesus Christ, who did not turn away from the dark and terrible places of this world, the dark and terrible places of my life and yours, but who descended into them, so that we might be lifted up.

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