

Fire and Brimstone
Rev. 19:17-21, Rev. 22:1-2
August 9, 2009
Dedicated to Paul Meadows

Do you all remember those billboards that lined our nation's highways a couple of years ago that read as messages from God? There was one that really hit home for those of us who live through Texas summers such as this. It read, "If you think it's hot here, just wait!"

Well, we can't have a sermon series on the *Hot Word from the Bible* without exploring the fiery scriptures about the symbol of eternal flames.

(Now to be sure, when I set out this sermon series several months ago, I didn't know what scriptures or topics would be addressed on Laity Sunday. I know for those of you who were here last Sunday and heard Jim Frenzel, you've already heard a mighty word on the subject. And I have to admit that I pondered switching scriptures since I'm pretty sure it's been a long time since a fire and brimstone sermon has been preached on consecutive Sundays from the pulpit of East Dallas Christian Church. Still, in good Disciple tradition, there's always room for another perspective on one of the most important topics of our faith.)

At this time, in any other church, I would invite us to get out our fans and cool ourselves down as much as possible as we begin to study one of the hottest words from the Bible. But we're lucky that the a/c in this place works so well—like the love of Christ--keeping us cool under extreme pressure. Let us begin with a word of prayer.

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While I was at General Assembly, I ran into an old friend of mine who is currently serving a Disciples congregation in another state. We've known each other since we were freshmen at TCU, and throughout the years we've been known to come at issues from entirely different directions. Sometimes those differences resulted into explosive, fiery exchanges.

Still, I always thought we respected one another—indeed, loved one another—in spite of our opposition.

So imagine my surprise when he announced to me while at the Assembly that he was preaching at an Indianapolis church last Sunday, and the sermon was “Debbie Morgan is going to hell.” After he could tell I was getting ready to let him have it, he clarified, saying, “No, my real title is “Why I’m going to hell.” And then he explained to me what his message was about.

And he was right—if I wasn’t going to hell, I should be.

Why on earth would anybody WANT to go to hell, you ask?

After all, isn’t hell is a place of fire and brimstone? At least that’s how it’s been described throughout Judeo-Christian tradition, and from many other, even older religious perspectives. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the concept of the underworld was the destination of many souls after death, and was always depicted as laboriously hot and uncomfortable. The god Hephaestus was in charge of working the bellows of Hades, to keep the flames blazing and the heat rising.

And though images other than hellfire have been used to describe the place of eternal punishment, fire and brimstone seem to have won the day in our collective imagination whenever we call to mind a picture of a place as far away from heaven as we can get.

Where did the image come from? Probably more than any single natural phenomenon in the world, volcanic activity was the most frightening and unexplainable to ancient people. The eruption of a volcano must have scared the Hades out of them—or maybe I should say, scared the Hades into them.

Imagine the day when our ancient ancestors felt the earth begin to shake, then rumble as steam rose from deep beneath the earth’s crust. Suddenly, an explosion of fiery rocks would spray, and rivers of hot lava would flow, and the destruction would be total. Even people who lived far off would be impacted by fragments of flaming stone as they were expelled from the deep gullet of the earth raining fire and brimstone upon them.

What better image of eternal damnation than that of volcanic activity? The pain and death caused from burns of lava flows and sulphuric steam; the almost supernatural force that propelled magma from the earth's belly would certainly be a horrible way to face death. Then think of having to live in eternity with that kind of burning pain!

And so, this image of fire and brimstone as eternal punishment has been with us from our earliest collective memory. Christian preachers have long used the image in their sermons to admonish congregants to behave in this life so as not to be severely punished in the next. Perhaps the most famous Christian articulator of this kind of firebrand preaching was the early-American Congregationalist minister, Jonathan Edwards.

Imagine, if you will, in a time before air conditioning, sitting in a hot sanctuary on wooden pews with narrow benches. Imagine hearing at least an hour and a half sermon entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", all of which sounded like this: "Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth; yea, doubtless with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell. The wrath of God burns against them who sit in this congregation, their damnation does not slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow...." Nine pages of this!!! I can only imagine that his congregation could almost see the steam coming out of his ears and smell the sulphuric scent of brimstone on his breath! I imagine it would have scared them into being good, behaving themselves. Like I've said before, fear is an effective motivator.

And many of us have grown up with that image of the afterlife for evil-doers, so much so that one man woke up in the hospital after his operation and found the blinds of the room drawn. When his doctor came in, the patient asked, "Why is it so dark in here? Can't we open the blinds?" "Well," said the doctor, "there's a fire burning across the alley and I didn't want you to wake up and think the operation had been a failure." (from 10,000 jokes, toasts, and stories. Ed. by Lewis and Faye Copeland. Doubleday: 1939/1965. pg. 494 #5033).

[Just as we heard from Jim's sermon last week,] even Jesus preached "hell-fire and damnation" sermons a time or two in his ministry. And yet when you read what our Savior has to say, we hear something very different from what sometimes we hear from tele-evangelists.

For Jesus, the damnable sins are not the mistakes we make, or the wrong roads we take. For Jesus, fiery judgment is ours when we don't keep the Great Commandment--when we don't take care of our neighbor, our enemy, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, or the stray. In Luke 16, our Lord tells the story of a rich man who would not give even crumbs from his table to the poor man named Lazarus who sat outside his gate in misery. In the end, Lazarus was taken by the angels to the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man went to Hades. When the rich man looked up and saw Lazarus and Abraham in heaven, he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in this flame." Jesus ended the parable by saying that Abraham declined the request, since the rich man had had his time on earth, and had blown it.

The same message was preached by Jesus in another of his parables, found in Matthew 25, when he describes the judgment of the sheep and the goats. Jesus preached, "Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left....Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked, and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me.' Then they will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Jesus' hellfire and damnation sermon is a call for us to think beyond the confines of the word "me" and move to care for the "you", the "them", the "other." Hell is what we do—or don't do--that separates us from God. Hell is

what we do—or don't do—that separates us from one another. Hell is where we find ourselves when we've chosen paths that are destructive to self and others.

We who follow Christ commit ourselves through our baptism to follow Christ as closely as we can—to live a life building the realm of God. We know we're not perfect—none of us are. That's why we need each other—that's why the church community is needed—to encourage and support each other along the way.

And, also, it is in the church, through the body of Christ, that we're all invited to "go to hell." Indeed, we're invited to follow Jesus into hell.

Though this is not a particularly Disciple teaching, very early Christian theologians suggested that before Jesus ascended into heaven, he descended into hell to bring love's healing freedom to those ablaze with eternal pain. A parenthetical addition in Ephesians 4:9 reads "In saying 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things."

That wasn't much different from what did on on earth when he stepped into the pains of others, like the bent-over woman or went in search of the lost, like the Geresene demoniac.

If we are true followers of Jesus, then we are invited to follow Him into hell to help bring healing.

- Going into hell means taking a deep breath before you go into that hospital room to visit the family whose child has just died, joining them in the wracking pain of their grief—even though we're scared to death of death and the emotional aftermath.
- Going into hell means getting up at 0 dark-thirty on a fifth Friday morning and helping serve breakfast at the Bridge to people who look just like us—could be us—but because of hellish circumstances we can never truly know, they're there, and hungry.
- Going into hell means finding the courage to not only confront, but commit yourself to journeying through the hell of a loved one who is

making self-destructive choices—offering them support while encouraging them to repent—to turn their life around—and step from the fires of life into Christ’s peace and wholeness.

- Going into hell means going into our prison system, and confronting evil face to face while still holding up God’s mirror so that those who are imprisoned might begin to see the face of Christ emerge on their own as they feel the love of Christ shared.
- Going into hell means offering your life for the lives of others—as many of our brave men and women in our military feel very strongly they are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan
- and Going into hell means standing up for peace when violence seems our culture’s popular answer.

We as church are called by Christ to enter the earthly hells of our own making, to share a word of redemption and release, to give people hope, to offer people healing.

Our scriptures for this morning relate a vision of the ultimate time of fire and brimstone—John’s revelation of the eschaton—of the end of time—when all that is evil and destructive is put to death by the fiery Word of God.

But at the very end of the book—the promise that is both ours to use now and to live in hope for the future, is the text that guided the 2009 General Assembly: “Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

Is there fire and brimstone awaiting us at the end of our individual lives and/or at the end of time as we know it? Well, no one can tell you for sure, and if they try, remind them of the words of Jesus: ‘No one knows, not even the angels in heaven or the Son—only the Father knows.’ However, with Jesus I do believe that there will be a time of reckoning when we’ll all have to face the consequences of the choices and decisions that we made on earth, and for some,

there may be a heated exchange with the Lord that can't help but feel devastating.

But even more than that, I believe in the miracle of redemption—that somehow, out of the little fires of sin that burn us out and make us ashen with our pain, still God's grace and forgiveness has the power to put out those fires.

And indeed, God gave each of us who follow Christ leaves from the tree of life that will bring healing to the nations.

Corrie Ten Boom, a holocaust survivor, wrote in her book Tramp for the Lord that in the year 1947 she went into hell when she traveled from Holland to Germany to face those who had tortured her and kept her imprisoned.

The message she had to share with them was of God's forgiveness. It was the truth the Germans needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out, fire-razed land, and it was a message she felt compelled to share with those who had been her enemies.

She writes, "Maybe because the sea is never far away from a Hollander's mind, I like to think that that's where forgiven sins are thrown. 'When we repent of our sins,' she told the dry-spirited Germans, 'God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever....Then God places a sign out there that says, 'No Fishing Allowed.'"

(Corrie Ten Boom, excerpt from Tramp for the Lord, in Illustrations Unlimited. James L. Hewett, ed. Tyndale Press. 1988. pg. 217)

May we all be embraced by the ocean of God's love and forgiveness which puts out all fires, now and forever. That's the Good News that we have to share to the world that little Sadie Jane will inherit this day.