

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

NUMBERS 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 | PSALM 19:7014 | JAMES 5:13-20 | MARK 9:38-50

The poet Dante died seven hundred years ago, just a year after the completion of his famous *Divine Comedy*. The *Divine Comedy* is best known for its vision of hell that is downright, well, hellish. Scabs. Blisters. Tombs. Snakes. Fire. Three-headed dogs. The devil eating Judas. You get the idea.

Even for those of us who aren't on a first name basis with Dante, including me, his depiction is still hugely influential in our imagination. When the Pew Forum asks people whether they believe in hell, and well over half of Americans do, that's pretty much what they're talking about.¹ To put it simply, hell is a place you go after you die, and hell is a place you go because you're being punished.

And so when we see Jesus mention "hell" in today's gospel reading, we're expecting more of the same. But it's not quite what it appears.

The word "hell" that we hear today comes from the word *Gehenna*. It comes from the Hebrew *Gai Ben Hinnom* or the valley of Hinnom.² This is a valley near Jerusalem. It's an actual place you can go to. And around the time the Hebrew Bible was written, it was a place where pagan ritual sacrifices happened. The prophet Jeremiah talks about it as a place where child sacrifice happens. For Jews trying to stay faithful to their covenant with God, it was the sort of place that you wanted to stay away from. What happens in Gehenna? Well, nothing good.

And around the time the New Testament was written, *Gehenna* started taking on different connotations. Not just an actual place but a kind of shorthand for a life lived apart from God. To live in *Gehenna* wasn't just to live in this particular neighborhood, but to exist cut off from God's way of being. That's the context for today's reading.

Notice the difference. Dante's hell is a place you're punished after you die. Jesus's Gehenna is a way of described living apart from God.

So if there's no three-headed dog or lake of fire, what does that experience of life apart from God look like? Well, you heard two examples of that in today's readings.

From the book of Numbers, we heard a wonderful story about a leadership crisis among the Israelites. Moses is burned out and resentful because the Israelites won't stop complaining. And so a share of God's spirit is spread out among some other leaders so the burden can be shared by more people. Except there's an accident. These two guys, Eldad and Medad, don't go through the official process. They're not at the meeting. They didn't fill out the application. They're just hanging out on their own. But something happens, and they still end up with a share of God's spirit.

And notice what Joshua does. Joshua is the key character in the last half of this story. Joshua is Moses's number two. He's the next in line for power. And when he sees God's spirit being given to more and more people, he says, "My lord Moses, stop them!" Joshua is angling for power, so he wants fewer prophets. Joshua sees God's spirit entering the world, and he's offended. He thinks, "This is bad." That's what hell is. That's what Gehenna is.

And from St. Mark's gospel, we heard a story about healings. The disciples find out that some people have been going around and casting out demons in Jesus's name. It's actually not so different from the disciples' own mission. Except for one small detail. These people aren't disciples of Jesus. They don't know them. Have never heard of them. And so what do the disciples do? They try to stop it. The disciples are so concerned with being boxed out of their position that they see the power of Jesus at work in the world, and they are offended. That's what Gehenna is. That's what hell is.

What sends us into that experience? Well, it's not God. After all, Jesus tells the disciples to knock it off and leave these other people alone. And Moses shuts Joshua's protest down with this poetic aside:

¹ "Belief in Hell - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center," accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-hell/>.

² Meghan Henning, "Hell," Bible Odyssey, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/main-articles/hell>.

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“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” Jesus tells us that what we need to be saved from isn’t God. What we need to be saved from is ourselves.

Because what sends us into that hellish narrowness are our own attachments. We could say that it’s our projections. To live in “hell” is not to be punished by some vengeful God after you die because you partied too hard. To live in hell is to live like Joshua and the disciples. To be so turned in on your own attachments, your own projections, your own desires, that you see goodness and mercy right in front of you, and you think you need to get rid of it.

And what is Jesus’s advice for staying out of that place? Well, you heard that in today’s gospel reading, too. Jesus tells us to pay attention to your attachments. Watch out for the things you project onto the world that keep you from seeing God’s action clearly. Jesus says that if your foot, hand, or eye causes you to stumble, get rid of it. The word that Jesus uses here for “stumble” is the same as “offended.” If your foot makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of it. If your hand makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of it. And if your eye makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of it.

Jesus is, of course, being hyperbolic. He’s speaking in metaphors. Which is great, except that means Jesus might actually have something to say to us. What are the attachments that make the kingdom of God seem offensive to us? Well, it’s easy to come up with a bunch. Probably too easy. If your attachment to wealth makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of your wealth. If your piety makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of your piety. If your self-righteousness makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of your self-righteousness. If you are like Joshua and your need to be at the center of everything makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of it. If you are like the disciples and your desire to be the greatest makes the kingdom of God offensive to you, get rid of it. Cast it out.

Getting rid of those attachments is hard. It was hard for Joshua. It was hard for the disciples. It’s hard for us. It’s not a coincidence that what makes the kingdom of God offensive to us is usually the futility of our attempts to justify our place in it. That we’re working desperately hard for something we already have. What’s offensive is how uninterested God is in our own efforts, our own status, and our own worthiness.

In fact, what makes it possible for us to examine those attachments and cast out the ones that make grace so offensive to us are our baptisms. Because in our baptisms, Christ is attached to us. No matter what. And because we are always attached to Jesus, we can cast out anything that isn’t lifegiving to our selves and our neighbors. Being attached to Jesus makes it possible for us to give up our attachment to self-righteousness, our attachment to hoarded wealth, and our attachment self-serving piety.

And more than that, being attached to Jesus means that there is no situation in which we live apart from God. That the option of being beyond help, beyond redemption, and beyond saving doesn’t really exist. There is no way for us to be cast out from the heart of God.

Can we be so turned in on ourselves that we’re offended by God’s grace? Yea, of course. Joshua was. The disciples were. God knows we are sometimes. But Jesus promises us that it’s impossible to stay there. Whenever we start turning down to the valley of our own self-righteousness and self-serving piety, Christ comes to find us.

The fire is never quenched. But Christ is never absent.

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