

Sermon 2/6/22

Jesus and Hell

Today marks the end of our sermon series based on the Brian McLaren book We Make The Road By Walking. As Greg mentioned last week, the book has been a great a jumping-off point for his sermons, and it was a year ago that we began reading the weekly essays, following along chapter by chapter in the Thursday night study group, and looking at the suggested Scriptures each week in Bible Study.

We started our series last year with chapter 23, to line up the weekly essays with Easter and Christmas, So now we're ending in the middle of the book, and chapter 24 has an intriguing title: "Jesus and Hell."

Without even reading the essay, the title alone made me stop and think: what, in fact, did Jesus have to say about hell?

I'm not talking about the hell of getting stuck in traffic or having too much homework, but the dominion of hell, the netherworld populated by the damned—souls of the dead who are doomed to forever endure the ravages of fire and brimstone.

We've certainly heard the thunderings of preachers warning of the eternal terrors of "fire and brimstone" if we disobey God's laws.

Were they quoting Jesus?

Not exactly. "Fire and brimstone" does appear in the Bible: in the first book, Genesis, when Sodom and Gomorrah suffer that punishment; and the pair make a comeback at the end of the Bible in Revelation—but this particular phrase was never uttered by Jesus.

If not “fire and brimstone,” how then did Jesus describe hell?

Well, here’s a problem: the word “hell” itself.

I don’t mean it’s a problem like it’s a bad word, and I should say “heck” instead; it’s a problem because the word “hell” comes from a time centuries after Jesus, from a place thousands of miles away from the Fertile Crescent, from a culture far removed from the Hebrew people—and so the word “hell” doesn’t quite match up with any word spoken by Jesus.

“Hell” entered the English language in the 8th Century, from Old Teutonic; it came from the name of the goddess of the infernal regions in European mythology.

There’s not a direct equivalent for this word in the Aramaic or Hebrew of Jesus, because this concept of hell—an underworld domain of eternal torture for the damned—was not a component of traditional Jewish theology.

Early English Bibles—notably, the influential King James Version—did use the word “hell” in translating from Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, but this was usually a mismatch for the intended meaning.

Newer translations of the Bible in use today have often found more accurate ways to convey some of these passages, or sometimes just transcribe the original word, the most common Hebrew term in question being “Sheol,” a place of darkness where all the dead reside. The term appears dozens of times in the Old Testament, and sometimes an actual location or realm is indicated, and other times “Sheol” is simply a shorthand reference to “the grave,” but this is the place referred to when the Lord says

to Abraham, "You, however, will go to your fathers in peace."
(Genesis 15:15)

So while we think of "hell" as part of a system in which there are rewards and punishments for our earthly choices, "Sheol" has no such connotations; there are no moral implications for entering this realm—"sheol" is for everyone!

When Jesus spoke of this realm, the New Testament writers, rendering his words into Greek, translated "Sheol" as "Hades," which is the Underworld of Greek mythology. "Hades" is a better translation than "Hell," —Hades, like Sheol, houses all of the dead, unlike Hell, which is a place of eternal punishment only for the wicked.

There is another word Jesus used several times that shows up as "hell" in many English Bibles: "Gehenna." This word referred to an actual valley running along the west and south of Jerusalem. According to the Old Testament, child sacrifice to the false gods Molech and Baal was practiced here, and later it became a place where the city's trash was set on fire, and a banishment site for lepers and other outcasts. Gehenna was truly a God-forsaken place, and it became a symbol of a place of punishment of the dead for bad behavior on earth. The association with fire brings it even closer to "hell" as we think of it, though rabbinical thought treated it not as a permanent destination, but a place where souls of the wicked might uncomfortably reside and purify until they had atoned for their sins.

Traditional Jewish thought was exemplified by the Sadducees, the sect in Jesus's time that was a rival to the Pharisees. A religious and political force whose members included the upper class of Jewish society, the Sadducees flourished for about two hundred years until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death; they took the Torah as their sole authority, which mentions Sheol, but makes no

further speculation on the subject. The focus of the Sadducees was on this life, and how to be a good and faithful human being. This focus on the “present” life, and not the “afterlife” has typically been the thrust of Judaism.

But after years of exile and then years of occupation by foreign powers, new concepts began to enter popular thought. After all, cultures surrounding Palestine—the Egyptians, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Greeks,—all had different theories about the afterlife, about judging the souls of the departed, about realms where the dead might migrate, such as the Elysian Fields, or Tartarus. So Jesus was able to use ideas like the symbolic “Gehenna” and other bold images in his teaching in a way his listeners would understand.

Theologians have wrestled with determining the specifics of the afterlife for centuries. The *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas in the 1200’s famously speculated that there were five different abodes of the dead: paradise, hell of the damned, limbo of children, purgatory, and limbo of the Fathers.

Jesus, on the other hand, never mentioned “hell”, but he did affirm an afterlife, and he certainly issued stern warnings about straying from God’s path.

Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he cautioned, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

He makes clear what’s in the balance: life or destruction.

Jesus used many different teaching tools in his ministry: signs and wonders, public lectures, impromptu moments, public

demonstrations. His parables engaged his listeners' imaginations, and every once in awhile, he used the language of the carrot and the stick, as when he first complimented the Centurion on his faith, then warned that the unfaithful would be "thrown out, into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

McLaren explains the purpose: "to wake up complacent people, and to challenge them to change—using the strongest language and imagery available."

What about the parable, in Luke, of the Rich Man, who lived a life of luxury; and Lazarus, the beggar covered with sores. They both die and the rest of the story takes place in Hades, where their roles reverse: the beggar is comfortably in the "Bosom of Abraham" while the formerly rich man is now in torment, (reflecting the popular idea borrowed from the Babylonians that there were special rooms in Hades to punish the wicked.) This is one of the most frequently illustrated parables in medieval art, but its vivid story-telling is not intended to provide a theologically accurate preview of the after-life, but rather to encourage repentance, that those better off learn to be their brother's keeper.

The thing McLaren wants us to notice is that "again and again Jesus took conventional language and imagery for hell and reversed it...God is not the one who punishes some with poverty and sickness, nor is God the one who favors the rich and righteous. God is the one who loves everyone, including the people the rest of us don't think count."

Take today's Scripture reading about the Sheep and the Goats. In this parable, a King identified as the Son of Man himself appears before all the nations to deliver inheritances to those he separates into two groups. The Sheep, to their bewilderment, receive entry into the Kingdom for the help they've given the King—when did

they perform such a service, they wonder? “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” The parable continues, and now the whole story is retold from the Goat’s point of view. “ ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you.’ He will reply ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

So once again Jesus turns traditional ideas of Paradise and Damnation upside down; it is the self-centered rich, righteous, and respectable who will suffer in the end; the poor and the marginalized are rewarded, despite their lowly status, if they simply show love for their neighbor.

Love: this is at the heart of all of Jesus’s teaching. He wanted his listeners to repent—to re-think their relation to God and Man, to change their course of conduct, to develop new mental and spiritual habits, to see all of us as God’s children. When he used dramatic language, as in the parables we’ve looked at, it was to underline the urgency of his message, that we not put off till tomorrow the changes we need to make today.

So though Jesus at times had his followers consider the future and distant realms, his message was really about apprehending the divine here and now. “The Kingdom of God is in your midst,” he reassures us (Luke 17:21), there is no need to delay. He reminds us “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.” (Matthew 6:34); Paradise is found if we trust in God, right here, right now.

Jesus never spoke specifically of Hell, instead he left a lot to the imagination of his listeners by alluding in his parables to Gehenna or of being “thrown into the darkness,” or of a Judgment Day of

Sheep and Goats. By reminding that “the first shall be last” he was asking his listeners to look at the world around them, to consider how to bring more justice and love into the picture. When the King’s inheritances are handed out, it won’t be enough that we showed up for church every Sunday in our fancy clothes; rewards are saved for those who show up with genuine love for God and neighbor.

Amen