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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

A Sermon About Hell

1 Peter 3:13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. 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 lives, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

In her poem, the "Varieties of Hell," the poet Jill Alexander Essbaum begins with a common definition of hell:..."the inescapable presence of God / endured in the permanent absence of him." What follows, then, in the poem, are a few other hells. Here's a taste:

A hell where your name is forgotten.
Worse, the hell that remembers you.
Every rotten scheme your hands laid plan to.

Then, a hell for omissive sins.
All what you meant to do though couldn't.
How you intended to love, but didn't.

Hell is being cut off from the things that give us life and joy and hope. It is an apt eternal punishment, but most of the people who write about hell know, too, that we human beings seem to have no trouble making it here, on earth; we have no trouble carrying it within ourselves, building it as a cage for others, enduring it in increasing isolation. Yet we believe that there is no hell into which Christ will not descend and save us.

Over the last six weeks, through the Season of Easter, we've been reading from the first letter of "Peter." A little background on the letter: it probably wasn't Peter who wrote this

letter, but someone who is thinking about how Peter would think and write about current realities—realities impacting the communities in Asia Minor that the letter was written to. The letter calls these people, the recipients, “exiles,” likely not because they were people pushed out of their homes, but because they were people unmoored from society—unmoored *because* they had become Christians. And this letter is written in many ways to help them figure out how to live as “exiles.” It encourages them to set a good example, to kind-of keep their head down, kind-of blend in in the ways they live their everyday lives so that what others notice is their hope, their faith, which comes from Jesus.

Even as this letter seems to be about everyday lives, there are some details in the letter that suggest that the communities are being, maybe, ridiculed or slandered, or maybe even persecuted in some way. It is possible that there is a mild “Do you think you’re better than us?” Or, as sometimes happens when someone changes their mind or turns their lives around, others are very happy to trot out all their past shameful mistakes and missteps. It is also possible that the persecution the communities endured was worse, much worse—menacing or violent. The people wonder how they are called to live in a world that curses them? Or means to harm them? In a world only to happy to construct a hell for them?

Our world is quite different from that of the letter. Sure, there are places where Christianity is certainly under critique. But the reality is that we live in a world where Christianity is the norm, where our Scripture and theology have been used to shape society. And yet we have suffered hells, and we have built them.

Rarely are we persecuted by our government or society for our religious beliefs, but many of us understand the kinds of hell that live in the space between the death of someone we love and the funeral; between the bad news in the doctor’s office and the first day of treatment; in the long months of chemo and scans; and new plans to replace ones that have soured. We know the kind of hell that is broken relationships and uncertain futures. We know how it is when people handle us with kid gloves or, for fear of saying the wrong thing, say nothing at all. It is a hell of isolation: within our grief, within our sickness, within our loneliness.

On the other hand, we have made life in hell for others. To know the long history of colonialism and patriarchy, and to be honest about how they have been justified by scripture, and not just “scripture” in the generic sense, but in and by the very letter we’re holding, which says, “slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but those who are harsh.” And, “Wives in the same way, accept the authority of authority of your husbands.” Of course we do not use a first century standard to justify slavery or domestic violence. Yet pretending like we never did is dangerous. If we pretend that hell is heaven, how can we ever hear Christ’s proclamation as *good news*?

Which is what First Peter—and lots of early church texts—claim Jesus does. That he proclaims the good news to dead and those imprisoned in hell, including the people who

didn't get on Noah's Ark. This is First Peter saying the quiet part out loud: that maybe Noah's Ark isn't a children's story. We breeze quite quickly past the problems of that story, making jokes about the length of a cubit and the likely smell of more than 40 days and nights with a floating zoo. So we rush past the story's own claims that the earth was "corrupt," the people living lives absolutely counter to the goodness in which God created them. And, because this is a myth, it is fair to assume that those who meet their end in the waters of the flood are evil to the highest order. And, yet, in this letter, it is to these that Christ comes as a herald, as a bearer of good tidings.

This was a very important doctrine of the early church, stitched into the creed in this way: when professing faith in Jesus Christ, we say, between the cross and the resurrection, "he descended to the dead." As a doctrine, this is called the harrowing of hell. From very early in the church it was taught that while Jesus was dead on Holy Saturday he was still active, still ministering to other, that his descent to the dead was, as the poet Maren Tirbassi puts it, was a "well-planned prison break."

When this is depicted in early Christian art, Jesus is shown standing on the broken-open doors of hell surrounded by broken locks and chains. Often in those pieces of artwork, though, Jesus is shown bringing the patriarchs out of hell—like Adam, Abraham and Sarah, and David. But First Peter suggests that even the Bible's most villainous, most corrupt are invited along for the ride, chains—dropped, locks—picked.

Imagine then, Peter suggests: you. You have been slandered and scandalized. Called a hypocrite or disinvited from the family picnic. You who know the worst you've done, and, if you could, would hide it away, hoping for a place where even God cannot find it. But imagine, if Jesus even proclaims good news to the worst of the worse, what has been proclaimed to you?

But then, Peter says, it is actually even better, because you have been baptized, you have washed in the ancient flood waters, your conscience has been made clean. And now—now you need not be filled with shame, but, rather, with hope. And when you give a defense of the hope within you, you echo Christ's proclamation; you echo the good news that God is coming into the world to redeem it; you echo glad tidings that God is busting into hell to break us out, even with our mistakes, even with the horrors of the past.

But this only happens when we say the quiet part out loud. It only happens when we are honest about how we have been complicit in the horrors of history and enabled the isolation of others. We have to admit that we have constructed hell on earth, enslaving, displacing, deporting our fellow human beings. We have ignored, diminished, denied the pain and grief of one another. If we say there is no hell, than whatever do we believe Christ has come to save us from?

Are we afraid that what Christ has come is to save us from ourselves? Yes, Lord!

And, thanks be to God. Even into this hell Christ descends and here Christ abides with us, loves us, that we might love him, and in loving him might love one another, might restore one another, might give the kind of testimony that builds a future of hope. The early church believed that Christ hung out in hell, he hung out at the gravesides of those he loved, hung out with the dying and the dead-to-us.

You know, the early church didn't meet in light-filled sanctuaries, they met in the catacombs. When they gathered, they were surrounded by death on all sides, and *still* they proclaimed that Jesus is alive. And, Beloved, if Jesus is alive, so too are we—alive, set free from hell—from every hell, even the hells of our own making. Thanks be to God. Amen.