

DAMNATION

The Resurrection means that instead of getting up every morning and doing the best *we* can, we get up every morning and remember: He is risen! He is here with us. We are not alone. We get to live this day in His presence – someONE to turn to, someONE to guide and direct us, someONE to help and strengthen us all through the day. It is good to have friends, to know there is companionship at our fingertips. But this friend is at our soultips. And that is what makes life beautiful and exciting, worth the struggle, even worth the passion – and that is what we ought to be singing and thinking and talking about with each other today.

So why is the sermon title “Damnation”? Because concepts of damnation – of Hell and Judgment, of God rejecting and punishing us finally and completely – are the antithesis of Easter and everything Jesus came to free us from. And because the subject keeps coming up – in conversation, after study group, after personal counseling, after snide remarks, after more conversation. It truly amazes me that the fear of God’s condemnation and punishment – and the scenario of being thrown into Hell – hangs on, with such a tenacious and determined grip, to our culture’s consciousness: “*God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son ...*” and therefore we are all going to Hell, except for a tiny handful of the spiritually elite. God had to send Jesus so we wouldn’t go to Hell, because that was where we were all headed; only, it’s a precarious thing, and what if it doesn’t work in my case? Jesus came to save us, and died for us? Yes, but that’s only for the people who really “get it” – who really understand the Bible and the intricate wording and meaning of the creeds you have to believe and adhere to. Without precision, the magic formula won’t work. Then we go to Hell. And even if you get the formula right, if at any moment you forget or doubt or step out of line, you go to Hell. This is what many people believe today.

If you stop to think about it, which few people seem to do, Jesus did not invent God, Hell, Heaven, or the purposes of God. Jesus revealed – and continues to reveal – the mind and heart of God. What Jesus tries to reveal is the love and purpose of God, even unto eternal life. But according to the vast and popular beliefs of Christendom, God was running a world for thousands of years in which every single child God created ended up in eternal flames because there was not yet a Jesus to save anyone. Hello!? God had no purpose to save before Jesus? God was losing every

round with every child who did not know the right formula; who did not “call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” to be saved; who did not “accept Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior”? What kind of God are we worshipping?!

Now, I realize that if I suddenly changed all my convictions and started preaching such tripe from this pulpit, you would be all over me – at least I hope so. But some of you take it from neighbors and relatives with small objection. You hear it from other preachers and wonder if maybe they are on to something. You hope not, but you wonder. In your right mind, on a sunny day, you might even say out loud that this is not what you believe – that there are other things you believe deeply which contradict all such constructs completely. And if you tell somebody to “go to hell,” the remark does not imply any theological significance. You are simply annoyed at the moment and do not actually mean to claim nasty powers of divine magnitude.

It is also no doubt true that where you get into one conversation on the subject, I get into twenty. So I may have an exaggerated concern for the problem. Nevertheless, seasons come and go, and we live in a time when fundamentalism has been sweeping across the world. It is now a common occurrence, when someone is sick or dying, for me to get calls from some of the friends or relatives. They suspect that maybe this person is not saved and wonder if I know whether they are. Time is running out. Have they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? And if not, of course we know what will happen.

I know that we all express love from within our own context and comprehension. I know that when a loved one is in trouble, we are desperate to do something – anything we can think of – to help. I try hard to remember that this is true of fundamentalists too. All of us mean well, in our way. I try to remember these things before the fury rises within me. For it seems to me a very evil and ugly thing to take the revelation of God’s grace and love and keep turning it back around to the very opposite of all that Jesus came to proclaim. For me, Jesus really is Savior. Jesus *is* Lord and Christ. Those are beautiful words trying to express even more beautiful concepts. And behind the concepts there is the truth of God – vast and incredible beyond my mind’s capacity to grasp. Why does our world keep trying to twist and warp it – drag it down to some really tiny, really ugly little human superstition that negates the love of God in Christ Jesus? “Hey, you didn’t say the right words – you didn’t grab onto the formula at the right time – so all bets are off.

Jesus didn't die for you, just the others. God withdraws grace and mercy in your case. GO TO HELL!" This time with full theological implications.

Which leads me to some comments about today's passage, and then what I hope you will remember most.

1.) Hell will steal your Easter! (It will try to steal the whole Christian Faith if you let it.) The drama from Palm Sunday to Easter is huge. It is about salvation. It is about Jesus, Lord and Christ (Messiah), who comes as revelation of God's mercy, love, forgiveness, grace, and salvation. The drama is that Jesus comes (*"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself"*) to reveal, to reconcile, to redeem, to save. This is what God is doing. This is what God is about. Not everybody is seeing it all at once, but more and more do all the time. And this is what it is about. But it is very big and very new to us humans. So we keep reverting: returning to old ways of thinking and believing; turning it back into things smaller and more familiar. One of the deepest and most familiar threads of human life is guilt and fear. Another is anger and hatred toward those we do not like or do not understand. Between guilt, anger, and fear, Hell seems very right and appropriate to us. Either we are going there because we deserve it (guilt) or there are others we very much hope will go there because *they* deserve it (anger). The truth is not that Jesus teaches us Hell; the truth is that we *hang on to Hell* and Jesus cannot talk, teach, live, or die enough to make us let go of it. Guilt and anger are like magnets that draw us back to the same old fears and the same old way of thinking.

2.) What about all the passages where Jesus *did* talk about Hell? It is Bible study time and we do not have such time here. But I can still give you the essence. Jesus speaks about Gehenna (*geenna, yeeva, Ge-Hinnom*), the valley of Hinnom, the Wadi er-Rababi – the garbage dump outside the Jerusalem wall. It had an especially bad reputation because of sacrifices made to Moloch there in earlier times, including child sacrifices. Nevertheless, Jesus uses Gehenna – a physical place in a physical world, a place everybody listening to Him knew and had seen – as imagery to make a point. *We* turned it into Dante's *Inferno*! *We* turned it into a vast theological concept – an early version of a Hollywood horror movie. By the way, in doing so, we also missed the very thing Jesus was trying to tell us. And along the way, of course, it became *useful* – useful for pastors and parents and whomever – to frighten children, of whatever age, into better behavior. Fear only works for outer behavior, and not very consistently even there. But what the Hell, we have to try to control

each other somehow. A lot of money has been given to the church over the years out of fear of Hell rather than out of love for God. Doesn't that make you weep?

Nevertheless, fear is a lot faster and easier than genuine growth, real conversion, or actually coming to love the Lord our God. The trouble is: As long as you use it on purpose, it backfires – big time! As long as you hang on to a belief in Hell, you end up with a God who is not about love. Oh, I know all the arguments about justice and righteousness and tough love. I have rarely been accused of soft love or permissiveness myself. But that does not end up forcing a loving God to throw his children into eternal fire. It only means God will go on working for our awakening and growth and redemption long after we all think it is hopeless, and in realms far beyond our knowing. Jesus did not die – He did not go to the Cross, did not say “*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*” – just to keep us out of the flames. He did it to proclaim and demonstrate and prove the love of God that will not let us go.

3.) But I am speaking as if I have forgotten that Gehenna is only imagery. You cannot burn a soul with physical fire. Hell is not about HOT – it is about ALONE: lost, alienated, frightened, lonely. It is not about a place – it is about a condition. Life is not about your address (no matter where you go, there you are) – it is about your identity: who you really are; what you have become; what you really care about, value, and live for, and *how* you live for it. If you do not think Jesus tries to tell us this over and over, you have not read The Book with any discernment or understanding. “Go to Hell” means nobody loves you – or, more accurately, it means you do not *know* that anybody loves you. It also means that you do not love anybody.

People keep getting themselves confused because Jesus tells stories. Jesus is passionate and He tells dramatic stories to make His point as clearly and strongly as He can. Then we take the imagery of the stories and try to turn them into theological creeds on a physical level? Do we really *want* to miss the point?! He says there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Do you think this is about dentistry? Poor Jesus! What can the man do to communicate with us? I'm surprised we don't have a denomination somewhere that believes in dental theology, where all the members wear special false teeth around their necks so that when it comes time to gnash our teeth, they will be ready.

When my children were young, I sometimes wrote stories for them. My wife is a very skilled craftsman, among other things, and taught our

children to be artists as well, so everybody in our family can make really great presents for each other – except for me. I cannot make anything and keep having to buy these dumb presents at some store. Ah, but I did have a typewriter (computers had not been invented yet), so I wrote a story one time about “The Strange and Fascinating Giant.” He was huge and very friendly, and he had this incredible, magical eye. If you looked into his eye, he could whisk you off to any place in the world or take you on these incredible adventures. You might go through enormous danger and excitement, but the giant would always bring you home safe and sound. He was a wonderful giant. The only trouble was, he had this really mean streak. From time to time – and you could never tell when – the giant would just flat-out lie to you. And while the giant would never hurt you directly, if you believed the lies, you could still get hurt pretty bad. The giant would tell you to do things, buy things, and believe things, and he would promise that everything would be wonderful. Only, sometimes the giant was telling the truth and sometimes he was lying. So if you were not careful and alert, sometimes you would do what the giant told you and it would turn out awful, even painful, and maybe even hurt somebody you loved.

Well, it took my kids years to figure out that “The Strange and Fascinating Giant” was the television set. It was a good story and there was a lot of *truth* in it. But my kids were not stupid enough to build a theology out of the physical images I used to tell the story. Why do we keep trying to do that to Jesus?

Today we read an amazing story about a King who wanted to honor his son’s wedding with a very special banquet. I mean, this banquet would be so great that it would transform the country – bring peace and love to everybody who came to the banquet – because the celebration would actually enact the very thing it was about. At first the King invited only the insiders – the special friends of the royal family – the Chosen People, as they were sometimes called.

Now, at that time, the phone lines were down, the email wasn’t working, and nobody had clocks or watches, so you had to send messengers to invite people to a banquet. You sent out the first wave of messengers well in advance of the event. Everybody acknowledged the invitation and accepted it if they were willing to come. The messengers (prophets) told all the Chosen People that the King was preparing a special banquet in honor of the wedding of the Son, the Messiah – a great celebration – and they should all get ready to come. And they all said, “Wonderful! Terrific! We can hardly wait! We will definitely be there.”

So the King went on with the preparations and got everything ready – which always takes some doing with a really big banquet – and when it was time for it all to happen, the King again sent out messengers to tell everybody it was time to come. But now that it was actually time to drop everything and come, the guests who had been invited – and who had agreed to come – all refused to come. They couldn't be bothered, not even to come to the banquet in honor of the King's Son that would bless all of them beyond their imaginations to comprehend it.

Now, some kings would have taken this amiss, and might even have become quite angry. But this was a very kind and patient King. So he sent more prophets – to remind the guests of how wonderful the banquet would be, that they had promised to come, and that the time was now. But the Chosen People paid no attention; they just went on with their own plans and businesses – except that some attacked the messengers, beat them up, and actually killed some of them. A strange response. Yet if we kill the messengers, we can pretend we did not receive the message. (If nobody sees you take the drink, it doesn't count.)

Well, the kind and patient King was not about to let his servants be treated this way, so he sent soldiers to kill the murderers and set their town on fire – as they well deserved. Only, the party for the King's Son was still all planned and ready, so who could come to the celebration now? The carefully chosen, prepared, invited guests had been a big disappointment, so the King said to his servants: Forget all the borders and pedigrees, forget who is worthy or well-mannered, forget who knows the right people or is well-dressed, forget who is rich or poor – just go out there and invite everybody. Everybody is now welcome to my great banquet in honor of my Son.

So the messengers (missionaries) went out into all the world to preach the invitation to everybody who would listen. And pretty soon, the banquet hall was filled with a really motley crowd – not just Jews, but Gentiles of every size, color, sexual orientation, and political persuasion. But the King didn't mind because he knew the banquet would be so great and wonderful that everybody would be transformed into one great family. But when the King came in to watch the feasting and see how everybody was doing, lo and behold there was a man there who did not have on a wedding garment.

Now, we are supposed to know that conversion – New Life – is symbolized by new clothes. Putting on new clothes means putting on a new identity – a New WAY of Life. In the early church, when converts

were baptized, their friends greeted them, as they came out of the water, with a new robe to symbolize their New Life in Christ Jesus. Just so: Everybody who accepted the King's invitation was also being invited into a New Way of Life, and the wedding garments symbolized the new identity that came with the acceptance of the King's invitation and favor. So this man showed up at the banquet hall but refused the New Way of Life; he insisted on keeping his Old Ways. Well, you cannot be at this banquet, which is the New Way of Life, and keep your old garments, your Old Ways of life – your old identity, your old prejudices, your old judgments, your old fears, your old hatreds. So the King had him thrown out.

But that is only Jesus' story reminding us that we cannot be in the New Life with our Old Ways. It is categorically impossible. Whether we refuse to come to the banquet or we throw ourselves out or we feel like somebody threw us out, the fact is we cannot be in the New Life with our Old Ways – our old attitudes, beliefs, values, goals, behavior. And where people reject love, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell is not about hot. It is about being alone. And it is about it being okay with us for others to be alone.

So now, the thing I most hope that you will hear and remember: **It has never been the core of our Faith that everybody loves Jesus. It has always been the core of our Faith that Jesus loves everybody.**

Why does the church keep turning this inside out and upside down, spending so much time and energy trying to figure out who is out, who gets thrown into Hell, who is not going to make it, who will be excluded, who will be left out or thrown out? It is the antithesis of the Gospel. Jesus keeps trying to reveal and invite and insist that God loves us. It is the core of His ministry – of His life and death and resurrection. Why can we not keep focused on what Jesus *does* reveal? We simply refuse to rejoice, pick up the Message, and help to invite and proclaim the love. No, we keep wanting to think and talk and decide about who God is *not* going to love, who is *not* going to make it and why, and how much longer before they lose their last chance. So we end up negating what Jesus came to proclaim and affirm. We end up working against everything He lived and died and rose FOR!

What about Buddhists? What about Muslims? What about my Aunt Jessie who has never been to church and would rather die than go? **It has never been the core of our Faith that everybody loves Jesus. It has always been the core of our Faith that Jesus loves everybody.** Why would I, as a Christian, ever wonder if that includes Aunt Jessie?

No good Buddhist – no Buddhist worth his salt – believes in salvation through Jesus Christ, or in love as Jesus meant and taught it. No such Buddhist wants my approval, my faith, or my reassurance. If I tell him that Jesus loves him or that Jesus wants eternal life for him, he will thank me politely, shudder inside, and go back to his own WAY – the Buddhist WAY. **It has never been the core of our Faith that everybody loves Jesus. It has always been the core of our Faith that Jesus loves everybody.** It is none of my business to figure out how Jesus is going to deal with this Buddhist. But if I am a Christian, it is my absolute conviction and faith that Jesus loves him. For me to try to convert this Buddhist, who we have already established is devout and as sincere in his faith as I am in mine, is not my idea of love, respect, or Christian virtue. But you will kill me before you will convince me that Jesus does not love this Buddhist – love *and* accept him. And not *after* he agrees with me and accepts Jesus as his Lord and Savior, but *now*: Jesus loves him *now* and *as much* as He loves me. And Jesus expects me to know that – in His name, with His Cross as collateral – and He expects me to act accordingly.

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Jesus is Messiah: Savior. Jesus is going to go on loving people – all of them – whether I like it or not ... and whether *they* like it or not. That is who He is. That is what He is like. That is what He does. And He is very good at what He does! He is so good at what He does that I am a fool if I ever assume that He has lost anybody – I mean, lost them for good, once and for all.

I have never been a good Buddhist. I have been enchanted by Buddhism, but any of the world's great religions take more than a lifetime of devotion to comprehend and practice and live. I have not had nearly enough time for Christianity yet. But I do know what Christianity proclaims, what Jesus reveals, and what I believe if I am one of His followers: **It has never been the core of our Faith that everybody loves Jesus. It has always been the core of our Faith that Jesus loves everybody.**