

Sunday, August 23rd, 2015

PRELUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis

"Give to Our God Immortal Praise" - Michael Burkhardt

After the Prelude, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,

“Would you join me in reading the responsive call to worship adapted from Psalm 1 and printed in our bulletins?”

THE CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Psalm 1)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

The wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Let us worship God beginning with prayer...

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Let us pray... Lord, open our eyes to the transforming power of your presence. Intrude into our places of death with your commanding words. Wake us from sleep, and give us ears to hear and wills to respond to your voice. Cleanse our thoughts and actions so our love may be genuine and our dedication to your service, complete. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand with me and join in singing our opening hymn, “God of Grace and God of Glory”, number 420 in our *Hymnal*.

The liturgist should step back from the microphone for the hymn.

*HYMN OF PRAISE “God of Grace and God of Glory” *The Hymnal #420*

After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...

*CALL TO CONFESSION

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In penitence and faith, let us pray together the prayer of confession printed in our bulletins. Let us pray...

*PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God, regret is such a frightening word. It assumes that we are broken, imperfect and will fail. It places so much pressure on us to perform and do the right thing. We really don't want to live with regrets, yet the truth is, we will. No matter how much we do right, there will be moments where we will choose the lesser thing, turn down the wrong road, or follow our hearts instead of yours. But, this we know -- your grace is greater. It is greater than our wrong choices, our failings, our mishaps. You never look upon us with regret. You see us as we are and love us in it all. Thank you so much. We are overwhelmed. Amen.

*SILENT CONFESSION

(Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.)

*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. Friends believe the Good News!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*GLORIA PATRI

The Hymnal #579

Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen, Amen.

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. Having been reconciled to God, let us be reconciled to one another and share the peace of Christ. The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.

After a few moments, liturgist will step into the lectern and say...

“At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord brought to them by Ms. Karen.”

The liturgist will take a seat.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

(All Singing)

**Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;
Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;
Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.**

As the children leave, the Liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

“Would all who are able, please stand and join in one voice to sing our next hymn, “Day of Judgment”, printed in our bulletins.”

*HYMN OF PREPARATION (to the tune “Lauda Anima” #478) “Day of Judgment”

Day of judgment, day of wonders! Hark! The trumpet's awful sound,
Louder than a thousand thunders, shakes the vast creation round!
How the summons, How the summons will the sinner's heart confound!

See the Judge our nature wearing, clothed in majesty divine!
You who long for his appearing then shall say, "This God is mine!"
Gracious Savior, Gracious Savior, own me on that day for thine!

At his call the dead awaken, rise to life from earth and sea;
All the powers of nature shaken by his look, prepare to flee:
Careless sinner, careless sinner, what will then become of thee?

Under sorrows and reproaches, may this thought your courage raise!
Swiftly God's great day approaches, sighs shall then be changed to praise:
We shall triumph! We shall triumph when the world is in a blaze.

After the hymn, the liturgist will return to the pulpit and say,

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

Please be seated. . . Because the love of money is the root of all evil, we should seek to make wealth a tool for accomplishing good rather than as a means for accumulating things.

Because we have been blessed in order that we might share, we bring our offerings with gratitude and rejoicing. Let us give thanks with glad and generous hearts as we continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings.

The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.

THE OFFERTORY "Son of God, Eternal Savior" - Michael Burkhardt Dr. Elizabeth Davis

*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

The Hymnal #592

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.***

After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

***OFFERTORY PRAYER**

Let us pray... O God, you have made us very rich, and we are grateful for your trust in us. With our offerings we recognize the responsibility you place on us to be liberal and generous in our giving and in good deeds. We have chosen this portion to dedicate for the ministry of the church in our community and in outreach throughout the world. Make us aware of the needy at our doors as well as lost ones everywhere who long for the bread of life. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles' Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

Invite the congregation to... "Be seated," and take a seat.

SPECIAL MUSIC

Joanna Smith, Soprano

After the soloist finishes, the Liturgist will return to the lectern & say....

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from the gospel of Luke, the sixteenth chapter, beginning at the nineteenth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 910 in your pew bibles. Listen now for the word of God..."

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Laz'arus in his bosom.

And he called out, `Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz'arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.'

But Abraham said, `Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who

would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'

And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'

But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'

The liturgist will return to her seat either on the chancel or with family or friends in the congregation. Thank you for your service.

When the liturgist finishes, the preacher will step into the pulpit & say...

Our second lesson this morning is taken from selected verses of twentieth chapter of the Revelation of John, beginning at the sixth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page #1085 in your pew bibles.

Listen once more for the word of God...

"Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years. . . . And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done.

And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done.

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

THE SERMON

"The Good News About Hell"

Father Boudreaux and Bro. Thibodeaux were fishing on the side of the road. They thoughtfully made a sign saying "De End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!," and showed it to each passing car. Car after car passed them by, and expressed their displeasure and lack of appreciation for their well intentioned efforts with one finger salutes and blaring car horns. Occasionally, one would roll down his window and holler, "Leave us alone you religious nuts!" the passing of each car was soon followed by the sound of a big splash. After this had happened a couple dozen times, they looked at each other and Father Boudreaux inquired of his Baptist brother...."You think we should just put up a sign that says: 'bridge out' instead?"

In fairness to Boudreaux and Thibodeaux, in real life there is also another unseen character in the story. He is holding a sign that reads: "Don't trust the guys on the other side.

They are lying to you. Enjoy your trip.” He is probably a proponent of the New Atheism, religious pluralism, humanism, or what have you. His is just one of many voices today attacking those on their journey home to God. Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, would all say that Christianity has done more harm than good. Others, like Bill Maher, have even advocated imprisonment for parents who teach their kids about hell or anything else to do with religion.

Let’s be honest.... Nobody wants to hear about hell any more than they want to hear about AIDS, Cancer, ISIS, or Boko Haram. Maybe that is why Hell has fallen on lean times.

It used to be that the vast majority of Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation, believed that Hell was a real place where the wicked and the impenitent go when they died. But not anymore. Most mainline churches stopped preaching about Hell years ago. Ministers to the well educated and economically mobile stopped believing in Hell years before that. Hell made people uncomfortable. Hell was too “old-fashioned.” The topic of Hell was bad for the bottom line—attendance **and** income.

The surprising thing is that this is not a phenomenon of recent history. It was no different in biblical times. When times were good, people didn’t want to hear threats and warnings. But even so, God, in His mercy, sent prophets to warn them of the consequent judgment to come. And they killed those prophets (Matthew 23:37). When Elijah was sent to warn Israel of the drought that God would send because of their Baal worship, he was accused of troubling Israel (I Kings 18:17).

Jesus came to call people back to God and warn about the pitfalls and traps ahead, but the people chose to ignore him as long as they could, and to kill him when they couldn’t.

Surprisingly, Jesus spoke often of hell. Thirteen percent of his teachings refer to eternal judgment and hell. Two-thirds of his parables relate to resurrection and judgment. Jesus wasn't cruel or capricious-- he was just honest.

So what is Hell like? Is it a real place?

Jesus speaks in tangible terms. "Fear Him," he warns, "who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). In this morning’s gospel reading, He quotes the rich man in Hell pleading for Lazarus to "dip the tip of his finger in water to cool my tongue". Words such as body, finger, and tongue presuppose a physical state in which a throat longs for water and a person begs for physical relief.

Acts 1:25 says that after hanging himself, Judas Iscariot had gone "to his own place". The Greek word for place is *topos*, which means a physical or geographical location. Jesus describes heaven with the same noun: "In My Father's house are many mansions... I go to prepare a place for you". Hell AND heaven, are locations, not states of mind, not metaphysical dimensions, but actual places populated by physical beings.

Isn’t it sad to think that God has quarantined one neighborhood in his vast universe as the depository of the hard-hearted.

So the scoffer next challenges, “If it is a place, where is it?” Jesus gives one chilling clue: "outside." "Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness" (Matt. 22:13). Outside of what? Outside of the boundaries of heaven, for one thing. Abraham, in paradise, told the rich man, in torment, "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us". No

heaven-to-hell field trips. No hell-to-heaven holiday breaks. Hell is to heaven what the edge of our universe is to earth: outside the range of a commute.

Hell is also outside the realm of conclusion. Oh, that hell's punishment would end, that God would schedule an execution date. New Testament language leads some godly scholars to believe he will: Fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt. 10:28). . . . "Whoever believes in him shall not perish."

Destroy. . . Perish. . . Don't such words imply an end to suffering?

I wish I could say they do. There is no point on which I'd more gladly be wrong than the eternal duration of hell. If God, on the last day, ends the suffering of the wicked in death and nothingness, I'll celebrate my misreading of his words.

But I can't ignore other scriptures where God amplifies his warnings with the language of eternity. In Revelation 14:11: "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night" (ESV).

Jesus parallels Hell with Gehenna, a rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem, where the smoke and fire and stench of smoldering garbage never ends— a place like hell where the "worm does not die and the fire is not quenched".

Jesus also speaks of sinners being "thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12).

Jesus describes the length of heaven and hell with the same adjective: eternal. "They will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46 RSV). Hell lasts as long as heaven. It may have a back door or graduation day, but I haven't found it.

But some things do perish in hell. Hope perishes. Happiness perishes. Peace is destroyed.

It's hard for us to imagine anything like it. Even the vilest precincts of earth have seen the grace of God. People who want nothing of God here on earth still enjoy his benefits. Adolf Hitler witnessed the wonder of snow covered alpine peaks. Saddam Hussein enjoyed the glory of sunrise over the desert. Terrorists, child molesters, rapists, murderers— all get to hear children laugh, smell dinner cooking, and tap their toes to the rhythm of a good song. They deny God even as they enjoy his benevolence.

But all of these privileges are confiscated at the gateway to hell. Those who reject the grace of God will be "shut out from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). The only laughter the unrepentant hear is evil; the only desires they know are selfish. Scottish professor James Denney writes that they "pass into a night on which no morning dawns."

More tragically, hell brings out the worst in those who reside there. Hungers are never satisfied. Worriers fret and never find peace. Thirsts are never quenched. No one there will ever be filled. As one writer put it, "Not only will the unbeliever be in hell, but hell will be in him too."

And nothing will ever change. Revelation 22:11 seems to emphasize hell's unrepentant evil: "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy" (RSV). The ungodly remain ungodly.

The residents of Hell will hear no admonishing parents, no candid or uplifting sermons, no voice of God, no voice of God's people, no choirs, no organs-- nothing to offer any sound

that might be taken for the praise of God. Spend a lifetime telling God to be quiet, and he'll do just that. God honors our request for silence.

Hell is reserved, not for those souls who seek God yet struggle, but for those who defy God and rebel. For those who say about Jesus, "We don't want this man to be our king" (Luke 19:14). In history's highest expression of fairness, God honors their preference. His voice breaks as He explains, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

So if God has done and will do so much to keep us from going to hell, why is Hell even a possibility for His children?

It is not his will that any should perish, but the fact that some do only highlights God's justice. God must punish sin. "Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful... (Rev. 21:27). Would it still be heaven for God's saints if they were forced to suffer for all eternity at the hands of those whose still live lives of unrepentant evil. God, inherently holy, righteous, and just, must exclude evil from his new universe.

God, eternally gracious, never forces his will. He urges mutineers to stay on board but never ties them to the mast. C. S. Lewis wrote, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside."

How could a loving God send sinners to hell? He doesn't. They volunteer. Once there, they don't want to leave. The hearts of damned fools never soften; their minds never change. "Men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory" (Rev. 16:9 NKJV). Contrary to the idea that hell prompts remorse, it doesn't. It intensifies blasphemy.

Remember the rich man in torment? He could see heaven but didn't request a transfer. He wanted Lazarus to descend to him. Why not ask if he could join Lazarus? The rich man complained of thirst, not of injustice. He wanted water for the body, not water for the soul. Even the longing for God is a gift from God, and where there is no more of God's goodness, there is no longing for him.

So let us waste no more time thinking that God doesn't care, or that he is unfair. He will only give each of us the fate we choose for ourselves. Much more, He has wrapped caution tape around hell's porch and posted a million and one red flags outside the entrance. To descend its stairs, you'd have to cover your ears, blindfold your eyes, and, most of all, ignore the inconceivable sacrifice of his Son, as the Father's hope for humankind forced him to ignore Jesus' crying out to the blackened sky, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Christ emerged from Satan's domain with this declaration: "I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (Rev. 1:18 NKJV). He is the warden of eternity. The door he shuts, no one opens. The door he opens, no one shuts (Rev. 3:7).

Thanks to Christ, this earth can be the nearest you come to hell.

But apart from Christ, this earth is the nearest you'll come to heaven.

THE PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Would you pray with me...

Almighty and Everlasting God, our Lord, our King, Who made everything and Who transforms everything simply by Your will. Forgive the rebellion against your will and the rejection of your love that make the very existence of Hell necessary. Deliver us from blaming you for the condemnation of those whose hearts and minds have been darkened by their own sin, who have chosen to live in hell rather than allow themselves to be transformed by your love and power at work around and, by your grace, in, each of us.

Thank you for your love which will not let us go, which keeps calling us, chasing us, pursuing us like the Hound of Heaven to save us from ourselves and the horrible fate that so many have chosen. Awaken us to the warnings all around us-- in the Bible, in our own divinely born sense of justice, in the love we have experienced through family and church. Never let us forget that You are the salvation of all who turn to You.

We also pray for those like Lazarus who are ignored and neglected and left to suffer at the gates of our community. O God, bind your people together and make us bright and shining witnesses to your compassion and your grace. Teach us how to enrich the lives of others with a love expressed in practical and caring ways and to be faithful stewards of all you have given us. Remind us that in bringing one sinner back to you from the brink of hell, we bring a smile to your face and cover a multitude of our own sins. Never permit us to disgrace you or ourselves by giving way to coldness, unkindness, or impatience, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Let all of us who are able stand and join in one voice to sing our hymn of dedication, "Amazing Grace", number 280 in our Hymnals.

*HYMN OF DEDICATION

"Amazing Grace"

The Hymnal #280

*THE BLESSING

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and give you His peace-- in your coming in and your going out; in your lying down and in your rising up; in your labor and in your leisure; in your laughter and in your tears; until you come to stand before Jesus in that day in which there is no sunset & no dawning. Amen.

*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

Psalm 139

Tune: Londonderry Air (O Danny Boy)

O Lord you know my laughing and my weeping.

You see my thoughts and deeds from every side.

Before my birth, my life was in your keeping.

I can't escape, no matter where I hide.

For if I flee from you, through joy or sorrow,

To heaven or hell, I find you waiting there;

Or ride the wings of morning till tomorrow,

Yes, even there, yes even there, I'm in your care.

*POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis