

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Jesus and Hell”  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Jonah 3:6-4:5;  
Luke 16:19-31

What was God thinking? What was God thinking when God sent Jonah on this absurd mission? The people of Nineveh were evil. They were some of the most brutal people to have ever marched across the middle east. They had devastated God’s people, killing hundreds of thousands. What was God thinking when God sent Jonah to preach repentance to them that they might turn to God and be saved? It made no sense. What was Jesus thinking? What was Jesus thinking when he told this story about a rich man going to hell and a poor man going to heaven. This made no sense. Everyone knew that to be rich meant that you were favored by God and to be poor meant that you were cursed by God. So it made no sense then at the end of the story when the wealthy man ended up in the pit and the poor man ended up in the bosom of Abraham. What were God and Jesus thinking?

My hope is that all of you here this morning could answer those questions. That you would know what they were thinking. You would know that God’s plan for creation is that everyone, and every nation be blessed. This was the task given to Abraham and his descendants. That all nations, not just one or two, but all nations would be blessed. So when Jonah is given the task of going to Nineveh he is carrying out the promise and task given to Abraham’s family; Jonah’s family. He is ensuring that all nations have the opportunity to be blessed. We would know as well that Jesus and later the entire New Testament focus on the obligation of God’s people to serve the poor, the hungry and those in need. We would remember that Jesus said, “When you do it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” Perhaps we would even remember the words of James, “Faith without works is dead.” Yet, what if...what if there is something else hiding behind these two stories? What if they are in fact about hell?

I know that the instant I say the word, hell, that in most of us, something happens. For some of us it will be that our minds are instantly filled with images. Images from novels, perhaps Dante’s Inferno, or from television or movies. If you watch shows like Supernatural or Grimm, you will have seen their images of hell. For others of us, perhaps what happens is that we have a visceral reaction; something deep in our gut, just kind of tightens. For those who grew up in more fundamentalist denominations or in denominations in which hell was a constant companion, the word created a sense of fear that always hovered in the air. It was a weekly dose of, as my Baptist friends call it, turn-or-burn sermons intended to make people toe the line or else. With all of that in mind, I want to offer us a very different image, or concept, of hell. So, take all of those images and emotions, and set them aside for a few minutes and consider another way of understanding hell. That hell is not about a final destination, but it is a reality that we create for ourselves when we separate ourselves from God and others. Let me say this again, that hell is not about a final destination, but that it is a reality we create for ourselves when we separate ourselves from God and others. To understand this, let’s turn to our stories.

The story of Jonah is one which is centered around a single word, and that word is down. When God makes contact with Jonah and asks him to help save the people of Nineveh, Jonah runs from God by going down. He goes down to the coast. He goes down into a ship’s hold. He is tossed overboard and goes down into the sea. Then he goes down into the belly of the bog fish. Then, even after he has saved thousands of lives, and helped to turn a nation from evil to good, he still goes down. He sits down and is angry. In other words, Jonah has created for himself his own personal hell. He is angry. He is bitter. And he is these things because he has gone down, trying to separate himself both from God, the source of his life, and from others, the people of Nineveh whom he hates.

Jonah finds no joy, only pain and frustration, because he is no longer connected to God and to those whom God loves.

The same theme runs through the story that Jesus tells. Yet here it is not that the rich man creates a hell for himself, but for Lazarus. Each day the rich man walks by Lazarus as if Lazarus does not exist. He allows Lazarus to waste away and become so low that only the dogs lick his wounds. This is hell for Lazarus. And the rich man creates this hell because he is completely disconnected from both God and neighbor. We know that he is disconnected because the Torah makes it clear that the people of God have obligations to feed, clothe and care for the poor. By not doing so, it becomes apparent to Jesus' listeners that this man has no connection to God in any way...and so the justice of God is that he will experience the hell that he had created for Lazarus.

These two stories then can be seen as cautionary tales; tales that warn us that if we disconnect from the love of God and from loving others, we may find ourselves in our own living hell. Yet they are also stories of hope. They are stories of hope because they show us that we can make a different choice, one of connection that offers us and others a bit of heaven on earth. This is the choice that was made by the people of Nineveh. They chose to reconnect with God and their lives were transformed. This was the choice of Lazarus at the gate. Though the story does not explicitly say so, the implication is that he is open to being connected to God and when he dies he finds this connection and thus experiences a new life; a bit of heaven. It is through those connections to God and neighbor, that little bits of heaven are formed here on earth.

She was one of the very first people I went to visit after I was ordained. My senior pastor asked that I go meet her along with the other people in the same nursing home. When I arrived I found her in bed, awake and welcoming. As I left the visit I was aware that I felt better than when I had arrived. Over time as I visited her I learned that she had been married, but had had no children, that she was constant in prayer, that she was beloved by the staff because she cared about them and their families and that she was always in bed because she had arthritis that crippled almost all of her body and left her in pain. One day I asked her how she did it. How was she able to be such a light to others when she was in constant pain? It was simple she told me. "I have a choice," she said. "I can choose to be miserable. Or I can choose to be happy. I choose happy." Her choice, even in the midst of her daily pain, was to remain connected in love to God and others. It never made her pain go away, but it created a bit of heaven on earth for herself and everyone who entered her room. She was and is my hero.

I understand that our lives are complicated. They are complicated by depression, and disease; by family and work dynamics; by politics and perceptions. There are forces around us that we cannot control. Yet these cautionary tales, are also hopeful tales. They remind us that a living hell is not inevitable. That we have the power to choose to be connected to, or disconnected from God and neighbor; that we have the power to create a bit of heaven for ourselves or others, in the here and now. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I connecting in love with God and neighbor, such that I am creating for myself and those around me, a bit of heaven on earth."