

Have You Been to Hell Lately?

Matthew 16:13-19

Have you been to Hell lately?

We constantly hear and see images in the footage of the news places that certainly do seem like hell. The terrorist continued bombings, the famine in Somalia and the millions displaced and dying, the genocide of warring ethnic group. . . Truly Hell on earth.

Have you personally been to Hell?

Have you experienced times in your life when the norm seemed to be chaos and trauma?

Have you lived under a cloud that affected everything you did?

Have you been in a situation that was completely out of control,

Where evil reigned,

No grace received,

No forgiveness imparted,

Nothing was right?

When you felt as though God was nowhere to be found?

Have you been to Hell lately?

Are you there now?

I can remember living in a particular state in the country and declaring that the State was Hell.

Actually, I believe now, looking back, it was my situation at the time, and my State of Mind, not the actual location, that gave me the feeling of being in Hell.

I remember driving in my car to work with the windows up, and screaming as loudly as I could:

“Where are you God?” “Why is all this happening to me?”

I’m not sure what those in the cars around me thought as they passed by a lone woman ranting and raving in the car next to them. And I didn’t really care at the time—I was in Hell, in the pit, in Sheol, in Gehenna, and I couldn’t get out, stranded. . .and felt all alone!

And this is the time—the time we are in the pit, the time we are in the midst of torment, pain, the time we are stranded and see no way out—this is the time that we come to understand what FAITH is and who God is and what Christ is all about.

We can declare FAITH and our trust in God and proclaim Christ when all is right, in good order, but when it comes to living in the storm, living in the depths, facing pain, dis-order, danger, chaos—then is when our understanding of just what it is or who it is that centers our lives, who grounds us, who is our foundation, who is with us, really matters.

We humans are apt to profess A LOT when NOT A LOT is at stake—but faith is only evident when we HAVE to faith—when we come up against insurmountable perils—when we face Hell—then we know if we have faith and where our faith lies.

I remember reading a novel and the main character goes through life denying that there is a God. He meets with one disaster after another, and becomes a broken man, discouraged and depressed with life. The only thing that he has that brings him any joy is a daughter, a young girl who is diagnosed with cancer. As this man visits each day in the hospital, raging with anger that still one more of life's cruelties has struck him, he meets another father of a young boy with cancer. This other father has such a good outlook on life even in the midst of watching his son die, that our main character strikes up an ongoing conversation with him out of curiosity.

He finds out that this father has a very strong faith in God, and our character scoffs at his gullibility to trust in a God that would allow such a situation to exist. But, little by little, he is urged to try and pray and is told by the boy's father that he too will find peace. So this doubter, this cynic stops by the Catholic church next to the hospital each day, goes in, kneels, and prays for himself and his daughter. The little girl whose life was terminal begins to respond to treatment and grows stronger. And so the main character believes that there must be a God and this prayer thing works, and he frequents the church more and more.

It was his daughter's birthday and the father stops at a bakery to get her cake. However, when he arrives at the little girl's room, she is not there—and the doctor informs him that she has indeed died. At which point, the father runs to the church and hurls the birthday cake at the crucifix hanging in the front of the church, yelling obscenities at Jesus on the cross—he stops, exhausted and he watches as the cake fall down the crucified Christ. He then got it. . . God knows our pain, has experienced it, and says to us all, I am with you through it all—I hurt with you, I love you, and there will always be a resurrection after the crucifixion, when faced with hell, claim me as Lord, and know that I will see you through it all.

Going to our scripture reading today, Jesus knew that faith could only be declared and lived when we face the hells in our lives. And he wanted to find out if the disciples really had faith in him and if they really claimed him as Lord of their lives—so Jesus took them to Caesarea Philippi. I believe that the location where events took place in the Bible have great significance. So why did Jesus take the disciples to Caesarea Philippi to see if they knew who he was and trusted him as their Lord? What was the significance of this city?

Well, it was one of the great tourist capitals of the ancient world. Tourists came from all over. They came because:

Caesarea Philippi had many temples of the ancient Syrian god called Baal that one could visit.

There was the magnificent white marble temple built to Caesar by Herod the Great.

It was also the headquarters of the Greek god called Pan. This pagan religion was certainly a reason that people came from all over. It was a mecca to the pantheists who would make their pilgrimage there.

And Caesarea Philippi had a certain natural formation in the side of the mountain which was called the Cave of Pan. The Cave of Pan had a huge opening in the face of the mountain and everybody who went to Caesarea Philippi had to see this Cave of Pan. If one did not, it would be like going to the coast and not seeing the ocean, going to D.C. and not seeing the Washington Monument or White House. This Cave of Pan was such a wonder because when you got up to it and threw things down into its opening, it appeared bottomless, very dark and mysterious. So, in Jesus' day they had a name for this opening at the Cave of Pan, and they called it **The Gates of Hell**. They called it **The**

Gates of Hell because in Jesus' day they thought that it was the opening to the Underworld, so dark and mysterious and deep, and foreboding.

Josephus, the historian, writes about the Cave of Pan: *Hard by the foundations of Jordan there is a top of a mountain that is raised to an immense height, and at its side, beneath, or at its bottom, a dark cave opens within which is a horrible precipice that descends abruptly to a vast depth; it contains a mighty quantity of water, which is immovable; and when anybody lets down anything to measure the depth of the earth beneath the water, no length of cord is sufficient to reach it.*

So, do you understand now why Jesus took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi to find out who the disciples really believed him to be, if they really had faith in him at all?--when Jesus wanted to know if his disciples had faith in him, if he was the one they trusted and looked to for help, to guide their way, Jesus literally takes them to **The Gates of Hell**—the proving ground, so to speak. He doesn't take them to Jerusalem, to the temple, to where it is safe, where there are traditional symbols and long established writings of one Yahweh, God. He takes them out into the world, filled with other gods, to the mouth of a cave supposedly to the **Underworld**, he takes them to **The Gates of Hell** and says, *“Now, who do you say I am? Who do you profess me to be? In the face of peril and danger, in a world of chaos and pain and all the other gods you can turn to, can you declare who I am?”*

It is easy to sing and praise God during the good times, during the safe times, during the high holy days—but what happens when we are on the edge, the precipice of that pit and feel like at any moment we could fall?

Well, as a church when we stand before **The Gates of Hell** and declare Christ Lord of our lives. . . We are given the keys to unlock the Kingdom of God by our faith and to confront the hell of intolerance: when people are excluded, shunned, killed because they are not like the majority. We are given the keys to unlock the Kingdom of God by our faith and to confront the hell of abuse: when people are denigrated, hurt, verbally and physically, by those who hold the power, the position, the wealth. We are given the keys to unlock the Kingdom of God by our faith and to confront the hell of injustice: when what is equitable and fair and right is ignored and people suffer.

And being before **The Gates of Hell** is a dangerous place to be. We might get singed—Actually, we will get singed, if we are being the church as Christ taught.

When we live with integrity—we will be singed.

When we live for honesty—we will be singed.

When we live for the rights of others—we will be singed.

When we live for justice—we will be singed.

When we live for peace—we will be singed.

William Booth discovered hell one night when he couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, then he decided to get up and go for a walk. He journeyed into a part of London he had never walked through—the poorest of sections—the ghetto. He spent the rest of the night seeing sights and smelling odors he had never before experienced. When he arrived home in the early hours of the morning, his wife Katherine was almost frantic. *Where in the world have you been?* She cried. He replied,

Katherine, I've been to Hell. I've been to Hell. And he then told her what he'd seen. And together they founded the Salvation Army to counter that Hell.

We have all had personal hells to confront when we need to declare Christ Lord and believe that we are not alone and can withstand the Gates of Hell.

And if we haven't been to Hell as a church, my question would be, why not?

The world is on fire, hell is all around us—a society torn by hatred and strife, a world unredeemed.

And Jesus comes to us and says in the midst of all of this, *Who do you believe I am, and do you believe enough to put your trust in me and do my work as I give you keys to the Kingdom?* Folks, what is our answer going to be here at Beaver Memorial?

How much faith do we have?

We bring these offerings to you O Lord
For your great love toward us. Your gift of love calls
Or a response that cannot be contained in envelopes
or plates.
Nothing less than all we have and all we are is good
Enough to dedicate to your will and purposes.
Use us, that your Kingdom may be realized among all
people.

And now to the God who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all
that we ask or think, be all glory, honor and our faith trust forever. Amen

On this again very warm Sunday, we need to be thankful that we are here, we've chosen this hour to
come and worship the One who gives us warm Sundays and all of our days on this earth. We come as
a family, seeking to try very hard to love one another, to practice forgiveness and mercy. Knowing
that is what will give us the most out of this life—to trust the One who promised that.

We are fortunate that we can talk to God directly, and that is what we do during this time of worship.

Bulletins. . .

Continued prayers for those engaged in the fighting in Iraq that does not seem to cease in the least
bit—those who are near and dear to us, those whom we do not understand and see only as enemy. For
all fighting, whether in combat, in ideologies, in system, institutions, churches, among families, we
pray because we have a Lord of Peace who taught us to be in relationship not to be combat.

Are there those for whom we need to know of this morning?