

**UNDER THE WINGS OF GRACE**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 30, 2017***  
***based on Matthew 23:29-33, 37-39; John 6:35-40***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, The Hope of Heaven. In last week's message, we began to consider the flip side of the promise of heaven—the concept of hell. In the United Methodist Church, we accent the positive message of God's grace, believing that people should come to God out of love and not out of fear of eternal punishment, and so, while we acknowledge hell, we generally tend to leave the idea of hell on the back burner, so to speak. Nevertheless, the concept of hell is an important one in the New Testament, and so this morning we will continue to reflect about its meaning for us. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Last week we considered the fact that the concept of hell has to a large extent faded over the past several centuries from the central place that it once held in the belief system of average Christians. Although polls indicate that two-thirds of Americans still believe that there is a hell, the idea of hell has moved to the periphery of the thinking of many people. Many folks just aren't terribly concerned about the prospect of hell.

Even in time periods when the concept of hell was more prominent in Christian discourse, there were people who took hell lightly. The renowned 18th century preacher George Whitefield recounted a story told him by a minister in Scotland about a woman who was lying on her deathbed. The pastor, standing by her side, asked her, "Where do you hope to go when you die?" She replied, "I don't care where I go." "What!" the pastor said. "You don't care whether you go to heaven or hell?" "No," she replied, "I don't care whither I go." "But," he queried, "if you had a choice, where would you go?" She said, "To hell." "Are you mad?" he gasped. "You'd want to go to hell?" "Yes," she said, "I would." "Why?" he asked. "Well," she replied, "all my relatives are there."

Her response reminds me of a statement by Timothy McVeigh, who, after his terrorist attack in Oklahoma City, quipped that if he went to hell, a lot of other people would be there too. The Bible teaches that, yes, a lot of other people may be in hell, maybe even some of your relatives, but this will not make hell any more pleasant. Depending on your relatives, their presence might make things worse.

The notion that hell might not be so bad is an idea that people have used for many years to avoid making any real commitment to God or to moral living. Some people have imagined that hell might be an agreeable place for all those who are hell-raisers. It is tempting for people, in various ways, to take hell lightly.

But Jesus took hell very seriously. He spoke on multiple occasions about the reality of hell, and he spoke of it as something to be dreaded. In the passage we heard last week, he said it is better to lose your limbs than for you to be cast into hell, or as he said in the closing verse we heard last Sunday, "It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye

than with two eyes to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:48)

Last week, we considered basic Biblical teaching about hell. We saw that hell, in essence, is the spiritual condition of being separated from God. Hell thus actually begins in this life for those who live in alienation from God; but no one in this life experiences complete separation from the goodness of God, for as Jesus said, "God makes His sun to rise on both the evil and the good" [Matt. 5:45]. Even the most ungodly people still experience the beauty of nature and numerous earthly blessings, which they can use to cover over their spiritual emptiness.

But to die in separation from God, to enter into hell beyond the grave, means to lose all those earthly blessings and to have nothing left. Hell in the full and eternal sense is the state of complete alienation from God, where a person, being cut off from God, is likewise cut off from all goodness, comfort, fulfillment, and blessing—trapped in emptiness with no diversions to ameliorate the pain.

Of course there may be other people in hell; but that will not help, because human beings without the love of God tend to torment each other, as Jean Paul Sartre suggested in his famous play, "No Exit," where he said, "Hell is other people." It is significant that although hell is typically envisioned as being full of people, hell is never envisioned as a community of people, because when people are alienated from God they are always alienated from each other. As Thomas Merton put it, "Hell is where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves." (from *New Seeds of Contemplation*)

That last line—they cannot get away from themselves—points really to the center of the agony of hell. When Jesus called people into discipleship, he said, "Deny yourself . . . and follow me." (Mark 8:34) The movement into hell is the precise opposite movement—to deny God and turn in on oneself. The essence of hell is to not have the love of God or the love of others but to have only oneself. As T.S. Eliot put it, "Hell is oneself . . . nothing to escape from, and nothing to escape to. One is always alone." (from *The Cocktail Party*)

Hell is *not* at all what God desires for us. God acts on our behalf through Jesus Christ, reaching to us with grace so that we can be saved from sin and death and hell, and enter into fellowship with God. God would draw us into a loving connection with God that brings us also into real community with one another—a fellowship with God that continues forever. But, as we noted last week, we are free to reject God's grace and put ourselves on the path to hell. It is never the case that God sends people to hell. People put themselves in hell by making choices and actions that alienate themselves from God.

This also means that the pain of hell is not something that God contrives. God is not like the devil figures in a certain Far Side cartoon, who torment the condemned by giving them a suggestion box, and then laughing hysterically at their pleas. God does not think up torments for hell; rather the pain of hell is the natural and inevitable consequence of being

alienated from God.

In last week's sermon, we saw that the Bible describes that pain using imagery, much of which came from a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where fires burned continually amidst heaps of rotting refuse. The garbage dump was in a place called Gehenna, and the term "Gehenna" came to be used as the standard word for hell; indeed, it is the word Jesus used repeatedly in that passage we heard last week, where the closing phrase about the fire that is never quenched and the worm that does not die lifts up images straight out of that smoldering garbage dump crawling with creepy things—images that clearly are not meant to be understood literally, but which point to how horrible it is to be alienated from God. Jesus uses the same word, Gehenna, in the passage we heard this morning where he castigates the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and says, "How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" (Matthew 23:33)

It is striking in this case that these people that Jesus said were on the road to hell were people who actually thought of themselves as religious. The scribes and Pharisees were strict interpreters of the Jewish law who considered themselves to be spiritually superior to other people, but who in fact, Jesus said, were engaged in great wrong. Thus this story is quite relevant to our time, because we also have people in our world who imagine themselves to be champions of the law of God and spiritually superior to others, but who are actually caught in great self-centeredness and evil—we see that especially in the religious terrorists who are plaguing the Middle East. Jesus makes plain here that claiming God and professing religion do not necessarily mean that one is truly in fellowship with God and on the road to heaven. As he said elsewhere in Matthew, "Not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

This is why the Bible often describes hell as punishment for wrongdoing, because our true spiritual condition is reflected in how we live. Those whose hearts are turned from God engage in behavior that is contrary to God's will, and thus hell is finally a just recompense for ungodly living and unrighteous deeds.

On the whole, the Biblical picture of hell is completely coherent. If you believe in human freedom, then hell is a logical necessity; because if people are free to choose to be in fellowship with God, they are also free to choose to reject God, but that is finally to choose hell, which is the spiritual condition of alienation from God. Moreover, people make that choice not just with their mouths but with their lives, and thus the pain of hell is not only the inevitable consequence of alienation from God; it is can also be understood as the justice of God carried out against human wrongdoing.

But there is one other key aspect to the whole picture—that is, that God is not content when people alienate themselves from God, and God is not happy to condemn people, even if they are guilty twenty times over. This is particularly clear in the story we are considering this morning from Matthew 23 where Jesus severely criticizes the scribes and

Pharisees. We began our reading at verse 29, but actually Jesus' diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees begins at verse 1. He says, "Woe to you," scribes and Pharisees, in this chapter seven times, each time enumerating some way that they were failing to be faithful to God. He calls them "hypocrites" six times. He calls them blind guides, blind fools, serpents, and a brood of vipers. This is not good; Jesus just blasts the scribes and Pharisees, and when he says to them near the end, "How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" we know this question is purely rhetorical. There seems to be no question at all that these guys are heading straight to hell, and Jesus appears to be ready to stoke the fires.

But then the chapter ends in a stunning fashion. It all concludes with a lament, as Jesus says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matthew 23:37)

We see here the real heart of Jesus. This not one who is just rarin' to send people to hell. This is one who is pained by people's faithlessness and who longs for people to turn back to God. Jesus has made plain that the scribes and Pharisees are worthy of hell. But he concludes it all with his most tenderhearted expression in all the gospels—the image of the mother hen longing to gather her brood under her wings.

Clearly, it is not God's will that anyone should be in hell; God desires that people turn from sin and come to God's mercy, so as to be saved from hell—both now and into eternity—and to enter into fellowship with God forever. This in fact is what the Scripture plainly says in I Timothy—"God desires that all people be saved." (I Timothy 2:4) This then brings us to the question that I raised at the end of last week's sermon. We have noted the logical necessity of hell as the spiritual condition of being in alienation from God. We have noted how people put themselves in that condition through their rejection of God's grace. But will God leave anyone in that condition forever?

It certainly makes sense that if people die in the condition of alienation from God, they are in that condition, that is, in the condition of hell, after death. But what is God's will for people who are in hell; indeed why is God holding them in existence in hell? We have noted previously in this sermon series that the only way that we can have any existence beyond death is if God gives us that existence; and is it clear in the Scripture that God through Christ grants that existence beyond death to all, to people in heaven and people in hell. But why exactly would God hold in eternal existence people who are in hell? If God's will is that all people be saved, it seems that God's purpose must be that those people might yet be saved; and since God has infinite time, infinite power, and infinite grace, it seems that God could find a way to accomplish that purpose, so that those who are in hell might yet be redeemed.

It must be noted, of course, that whenever the New Testament speaks of hell, it always speaks of it as simply going on forever. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that if you don't repent now you'll get a second chance after death. That's probably a good thing,

because human beings are procrastinators; if we were told that we can repent later death, a lot of us would just put it off. The Bible is not big on spiritual procrastination. “Now is the time,” says the Scripture, “today is the day of salvation.” (II Cor. 6:2) We are urged to take hold of God’s grace now.

But while the Bible never speaks of God giving people a second chance for reconciliation with God after death, second chances are what God keeps giving people throughout the whole Biblical story. The story of the Old Testament is the story of the people of Israel continually forgetting God and messing up in life, but God never gives up on them and keeps reaching to them with grace. The story of the New Testament is the story of Jesus continually surprising people with grace, reaching out with mercy to those that many had just written off as lost sinners. So while the Bible never explicitly mentions a possibility of repentance after death, it is good to remember that, as Paul said, “Now we see through a glass dimly” (I Cor. 13:12)—we don’t perceive the whole story of heaven—and if the shape of God’s activity throughout the Bible is to keep loving and to never give up on people, it is reasonable to think that God will never give up on people into eternity.

This does not mean that we can take hell lightly. Even if it might be that the condition of hell is not necessarily eternal, but that one could yet be saved out of hell, any experience of hell is to be dreaded. If God offers us saving grace now, why wait? Moreover, even if one could yet repent after death, human beings always have freedom, and so it is at least theoretically possible that some would continue to reject God’s grace forever. C.S. Lewis envisioned precisely such a scenario in his classic book, *The Great Divorce*, where he imagined the separation of people from God in hell, and he sketched a picture in which people in hell always had the opportunity to go to heaven, but were so turned from God in their hearts that they never took it.

The bottom line is that the way to heaven is open now. It has been opened through Jesus Christ. We are invited to come to Christ, and to invite others to come to Christ, that we may gather in faith under the wings of God’s grace, and know his promise, as he said, “Everyone who believes in the Son of God will have eternal life.” (John 6:35-40)