

The Divine Comedy

Psalm 139:8-12; Ephesians 4:8-10; I Peter 3:18-4:6; Luke 24:1-12

Easter Day, (April 17) 2022

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*Descend lower, descend only
 Into the world of perpetual solitude,
 World not world, but that which is not world,
 Internal darkness, deprivation
 And destitution of all property,
 Desiccation of the world of sense,
 Evacuation of the world of fancy,
 Inoperancy of the world of spirit; . . .*

(T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, III. 114-121)

Down, down, down. Across a wide range of historical time and throughout a diverse array of cultures, downward movement symbolizes loss, decay, and death – as well as evil, sadness, and slavery. The gravitational pull of the earth draws us downward and holds us fast; it weighs us down, thwarts our desire to rise freely, or to move, to carry, and to build upward toward the sky. When we are weakened by illness or burdened by grief, we find it difficult even to rise from our beds; when we lose consciousness, we fall to the ground in a heap. We find ourselves brought low, or brought down, in the depths of despair, depressed, discouraged, down-beat, our shoulders droop; someone says to us, “You look ‘down.’” And of course, when we die, our bodies melt into the earth: buried, ashes scattered, “we are dust and to

dust we shall return.” In all sorts of ways, the language of “downwardness” is associated with sickness, grief, and death.

Centuries upon centuries of humanity has wondered what’s “down there,” under the surface of the earth, where we’ve never ventured more than a few thousand feet. Alice goes down a rabbit hole and finds a whole new world; Jules Vern sent us on an adventure to the *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, but most of our stories of descent into the subterranean are full of anxiety, gloom, and doom. The Greeks spoke of Hades and the ancient Hebrews of Sheol; both were places of the dead, sad and shadowy. Those who died descended there; they might retain some elements of their personalities and a shadowy form of their bodies, but they knew nothing of joy that was promised in fully embodied life on the surface. For the Old Testament, the place of Sheol is also translated as the Pit. Often the Psalms speak of going down to Sheol, of going down into the Pit as a terrible fate. Of the sixty-five references to Sheol in the Old Testament, almost all are negative. Going down to the Pit is to enter the place of the dead (see David Cunningham, *Friday Saturday Sunday: Literary Meditations on Suffering, Death, and New Life*, p. 67-68).

The Christian understanding of Hell takes much of the understanding of Hades and Sheol and intensifies it. No matter what else you might have heard about Hell, its essence is the utter and complete absence of God. Hell is where there is no God. From what you’ve heard, Hell might be a place of torment and torture. Perhaps it is a lake of fire like in Revelation or Pandemonium in Milton or a sheet of ice in Dante where nothing can move, where there is no growth, nor change nor hope of change. But whatever else it is, Hell is the place of total alienation from God. God is not there. The Christian understanding is that Hell is reserved for those who clearly and consistently refuse the grace of God and want

nothing to do with God. So God gives them what they want. C. S. Lewis says, “There are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done.’ And those to whom God says, ‘Thy will be done.’”

The novelist Robertson Davies said, “There’s no reason why Hell should not have, so to speak, visible branch establishments throughout the earth, and I have visited quite a few of them.” You and I have visited them, as well. We know about or have seen those places where it seems God is absent – Hell on earth.

We see Dachau or Auschwitz and ask, “Where was God?” Or perhaps places in our world of unbelievable poverty and hunger like the Sudan in northern Africa or Haiti or seeing the bodies of civilians being uncovered in Ukraine after they had been executed by the Russian military. People, most all poor and living on the margins, are already experiencing our turning our planet into a living hell of climate change, drought, famine, fires, floods, and storms. Hell on Earth – where God is absent.

There is a teaching of the church across the centuries, sometimes controversial, usually obscure, that says that Jesus descended into Hell. In the Apostles’ Creed, there is a line that says, “He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead.” It is controversial because not everyone knows what to do with it. Some churches say it and others omit it. Our own hymnal puts an asterisk where it is usually said and refers us to the bottom of the page. Jesus’ descending into Hell is controversial because it is based upon only the most obscure scriptures – these verses from Ephesians 4 and from I Peter that we read a few minutes ago. Paul, in Ephesians 4, mentions that Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth. And I Peter 3 suggests that in his death Jesus preached to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey God. This is interpreted to

mean that Jesus went to Hell on Holy Saturday, the day between his death on the Cross on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter morning. On Holy Saturday Jesus preached to and set free all those imprisoned in hell.

For us Holy Saturday is an in-between-day, the day of our waiting and dealing with grief, the day of helplessness and despair, but while we were waiting, Christ was at work even in his death. He descended to all those in Hell, especially those born before the time of Christ, and especially the heroes of the Old Testament. Christ set them free. This old teaching from medieval times has been called the “harrowing of Hell,” which means the plundering of Hell by Christ.

This strange old teaching has not meant much to me in the past. It is certainly not something taught in Baptist seminaries, or in any seminary for that matter. But it is an old teaching that has become more important to me over the years of being a pastor.

John Buchanan, the former senior minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells of a young pastor who had an unspeakable tragedy that happened to dear friends who were also her church members. A husband shot and killed his wife and their son, and then killed himself. The young pastor had to deal with all this in her congregation. She said that this phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus “descended into Hell,” was something she never knew what to do with. When she was growing up, her home pastor had gone through all their hymnals in the church with a black magic marker and blacked out the phrase from the Creed, so she had grown up never saying it.

The young pastor said, the week I had to bury my friends, my fellow church members from the triple murder/suicide, “I understood that phrase from the Creed.

We have descended into Hell together . . . he has gone before us, into every corner of it.” She continued, “The good news is that when life takes us there, when we have to go there, he goes with us” (from *The Christian Century*, March 23, 2010, p. 3).

Here is a word of Easter hope, a word from the old Apostles’ Creed, alluded to in Scripture, that the church has held onto. On our bright and shining days, we might forget about this phrase “he descended into Hell,” or if we’re aware of it, we might mark it out with our black magic markers. But on the days when we find ourselves in Hell’s branch establishments, when death and deep darkness come upon us, we remember anew – Jesus Christ goes with us into Hell. Indeed, he has already gone to Hell and knows its depths and darkness.

Christ descends to the deepest most sorrowing places and there is no place so low and dark and deserted that has not already been visited and indwelt by the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

One of the early church fathers, Irenaeus, said, “Only what has been endured is healed and saved” (*Adversus Haereses* 3.23.2). Christ has not simply died; he has descended into the dark place of the dead. He has plumbed death’s deepest depths. And in enduring death and the place of death, he redeems it, transforms it, and brings the Light of God, to where before God was absent.

Hear me clearly; this is important. This means that there are no dark hiding places where grief cannot be comforted. There are no dark secrets where truth cannot shine. There are no dark evils which are not confronted and defeated. And if there were some in hell who were there merely for being born before the time of Christ, and Christ went to them, then that means that Jesus Christ redeems not only

the present and the future, but also the past. There is no dark past that cannot be healed and made whole.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* begins on Good Friday of the year 1300 and culminates on Easter. It is called "comedy" because it is a story or drama or poem that begins with tragedy and ends with joy and happiness. Dante, the pilgrim begins lost in a dark wood with little hope, and then travels down, down, down into Hell and discovers that over the gate to Hell is a sign which says, "Abandon every hope, all you who enter here." But then Dante sees that that the gates of Hell are permanently unlocked, open, and in shambles because of Christ's descent (*Inferno*, Canto VIII). There is no place where there is no hope because there is no place where God has not been and brought hope.

Someone say "Alleluia!"

And if it was part of the work of Christ to enter into the depths of hell and bring hope and redemption, then it is the mission of the church to go to those hellish branch establishments and bring hope and redemption. We are called alongside of one another and enter our Hell and endure it with one another. It means weeping with those who weep and waiting with those who wait. It means being there, being with, and being an instrument of Christ's hope and love.

Say "Alleluia!"

We can do this because of what the Apostle Paul says: Christ descended but then he ascended. In the Apostles' Creed the phrase which follows immediately after "he descended into Hell" says, "On the third day he rose again from the dead." Two different phrases but the way the Creed is written they are considered two parts of the same article. They go together. The same Jesus Christ who went down, down, down is the same Jesus who came up. Christ descends as deeply as

one can go into the depths, but after three days he is resurrected! He enters Hell, defeats death, breaks the power of evil, sets the captives free, and triumphs in resurrection. Nothing can hold him back. Nothing can stop him. Nothing is lost that he cannot find and bring home. And nothing will keep him from finishing the mission he was given by Almighty God – to redeem and save, to bring healing and hope, and to embody the love and life of God. Nothing can stop him – not even Death. Not even Evil. Not even Hell.

Someone say “Alleluia!”

Do you know why I’m asking you to say “alleluia”? This morning we began with the great Easter hymn, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” and we sang “Alleluia.” Alleluia is a particular Easter word for Christians. In the Hebrew it literally means, “all hail the One who is” or “all hail Yahweh.” When it is translated, we usually read, “Praise the Lord!” But sometimes we get it transliterated directly into the English as “alleluia” or in Latin as “Hallelujah.” And even though we got it from the Jews, the Christian tradition ties it to Easter and the resurrection. “Christ is risen! Alleluia!” It is the ultimate praise, the pinnacle of joy. It is the shout of triumph.

The Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions do not sing or say or chant “Alleluia” in their worship during Lent because they believe you will celebrate it more profoundly if you’ve abstained from it for awhile. It will have a bit of novelty and surprise if you’ve given it up for a while. More importantly, there is a sense that in Lent we need to linger around the cross in silence before we rush to Easter and shout “Alleluia!”

A few years ago the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was in the Sudan on Ash Wednesday and during Lent. He found himself among great

poverty, hunger, disease, war, and genocide. But even in these hellish circumstances, the people sang and danced “Alleluia” in worship.

He said he learned quickly to get over his life-long habit of not saying “alleluia” during Lent. He learned that the Sudan was not an “Easter-free zone.” He said that “we need to be reminded by abstinence and restraint that the world is still a Good Friday [and Holy Saturday] sort of place, shadowed by abandonment, terror, pain. But what if you don't really need reminding? What if, like the Sudanese believers, you have lived so long with abandonment and terror and pain that you can never forget or ignore it? These were people whose whole life was a particularly awful and crushing ‘Lent’.”

He went on, “Yet they could not stop saying, singing, shouting, ‘Alleluia’. If they lived in a long-term Lent, they also lived in an unceasing awareness of Easter. They had come through the horrors of war and oppression with the confidence intact that God was always there on the far side or in the depths of what they were enduring. If everyone else forgot them, God would not and could not. Because Christ was alive, they could live too” (from Williams’ 2007 Easter message).

Here are a people living in the depths of Hell but who know that the risen Christ is with them. And because of the resurrection, they know that Christ has overcome this Hell. Christ is their Easter hope in a perpetual Hell.

So this morning let’s shout with them “Alleluia!” Christ is risen!

Years ago, I read an old story about Jesus’ descent into Hell. Satan met Jesus at the gates of Hell and enraged tries to stop him from battering down the gate and entering Hell. Jesus cannot be stopped. He tears open gates and prison doors and cells wherever he finds them. Satan continues to try to stop him but is powerless to

do so. Deeper and deeper Christ goes ripping open cell doors and letting the prisoners free. Christ reaches the deepest, darkest bowels of hell and finally, comes upon a locked cage deeper and isolated away from all the others. As he approaches it, Satan cries out, “No, not that one! That’s my prize.” Ignoring Satan’s objections, Jesus wrenches open the door of the cage and cowering in the corner is Judas. Jesus reaches in, embraces him, and sets him free.

Someone say “Alleluia!”

Today on this Easter Day we celebrate the ultimate Divine Comedy. The tragedy of Sin and Death are overcome by the Resurrection of Christ. This is the defeat of Evil and the demise of Darkness. Death’s prisoners are set free! Christ is risen!

In Dante’s story, the pilgrim descends into the inferno of Hell and then ascends upward through Purgatorio and eventually into the Paradiso of the heavens. Toward the end, as Dante approaches the very dwelling place of the God of the universe, he sees more and more light and color, movement and dancing of the stars, and he hears the music of the spheres. Overwhelmed he says, “I seemed to see the smile of the universe.” Or some translators say, “I seemed to hear the laughter of the universe” (*Paradiso*, Canto XXVII, l. 4).

This morning let’s listen to the gospel story. Let’s listen for the laughter of the universe.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.