

A Hope or Hell of our Own Making
September 30, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; 1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

In the “Speaking Out” part of yesterday’s Democrat and Chronicle, this week’s Golden Pen was given to a David Knaak who wrote about an eighty year old neighbor of twenty years he only came to know after her husband died. Mr. Knaak’s words:

On Monday [September 17], a newly acquired friend, a neighbor, died suddenly. I had just begun to befriend her, having lived next door to her for almost 20 years, but never taking the time to connect. She had her family. I had mine. Since she was recently widowed, I felt she could use a friend only to find she had much to give me by sharing her long life and interests. The world is a little less interesting now that you’ve left it. Goodbye, Marjorie. I’m sorry I took so long to say hello.

The Democrat and Chronicle titled the section: “Life is precious, and so very fragile.” The underlying sentiment is that to be neighborly, to be friendly, to reach out to another is a precious commodity – and one that is, unfortunately, practiced all too little.

On the opposite page, the Saturday edition had the week’s “Thumbs Up, Down” section where one could look, and in the context of Mr. Knaak’s letter, see examples of neighborliness (a thumb up) or the lack thereof (a thumb down).

As ever, there are extremes, opposite ends of spectra, with most examples in life falling somewhere in the middle. As we examine the opposites of hope and despair, giving and greed, and yes, heaven and hell, we turn to extremes to make a point. As much as that seems like we are reaching for hyperbole and overstatements, there are plenty of examples to which we can turn. Two such illustrations are found in today’s lectionary readings from Jeremiah and Luke.

The Jeremiah passage is one of my favorites, for it is the most visceral expression of hope among the words of Jeremiah and recorded by Baruch, words that are for the most part about judgment, loss, despair and exile. Jeremiah’s primary message to the people of Jerusalem was that although centuries earlier God promised through Isaiah that Jerusalem would not fall, God had changed God’s mind, and now the Babylonian army, *at God’s direction*, would bring ruin to Judea and its capital city, Jerusalem. That part of Jeremiah’s message was not gentle and it was not hope-filled. And yet, if one reads Jeremiah carefully, one sees short rejoinders at the end of many of the passages of judgment that include God’s promise that *ultimately* God would restore the fortunes of Jerusalem. The people would return from exile in Babylon. There was a major “catch,” if you will. The people to return would be the children and grandchildren of those who survived the siege, the march to Babylon and the exile of forty to fifty years.

As God’s mouthpiece, Jeremiah lived both despair and the hope. In the passage we read today, relating a time when the leadership of Jerusalem finally got it through their thick skulls that Jeremiah’s predictions would come true, Jeremiah goes out and does something seemingly contradictory to the words of gloom and doom he had so often expressed. He redeems, that is he

buys, a piece of land that had been in his family for generations. We read only part of the complicated and legal process (certainly you didn't think legal red tape is a *new* phenomenon?!) by which Jeremiah redeems the land, but the point is that Jeremiah purchases property *he will never see much less cultivate or where he might abide!* What a statement of faith! What an expression of hope! On behalf of the Almighty God, Jeremiah concluded the purchase by saying:

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. [Jeremiah 32:15]

Despair and hope! Despair tempered by hope. For the people of Jerusalem, the despair must have seemed like a living hell for their world was collapsing around them. To witness the purchase of a piece of land was intended to be nothing short of a vision of heaven and hope.

Then we have the example as found in the Gospel of Luke. In sharp contrast to Mr. David Knaak's discovery, albeit much later in life than he wished were true, in opposition to reaching out to persons in need if not simple neighborliness and concern for another person's life or plight, we have the Biblical story of the rich man, who dressed in purple, ate sumptuously, but outside of whose gate sat a man named Lazarus who was poor, starving, diseased, and who begged for food scraps that might fall from the rich man's table. The passage speaks of Lazarus dying and going to heaven and rejoicing in the presence of Abraham. The rich man goes to hell and in his torment looks up to heaven and begs that Lazarus be allowed to dip his finger in water to cool a tongue that is in anguish. The man in hell is told that he should have listened to the words of Moses and the prophets who preached mercy for the poor. Then, we read an urgent ending that suggests that even if someone were to return from the dead, that the rich man's five brothers, still living, presumably just as fat, happy and ignorant of the plight of the unfortunate as their brother – that they wouldn't listen to anyone even if one returned from the dead. The assumption is that the rich man's brothers would probably suffer the same fate – in a hell of their own making.

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The cumulative impact was staggering. Eight days ago, on Saturday evening, Sally and I sat down to watch television. We had never seen the movie "Cold Mountain," about the people in a small hamlet in North Carolina before and during the Civil War and we didn't want to watch "Saving Private Ryan" again for its opening scene of the landing on Normandy on D-Day is one of the most horrific segments of film ever produced. Unfortunately, much of "Cold Mountain" was just as graphic, not just the scenes of battle, but the horrors of the bloody strife waged at "home." Then, on Sunday through Wednesday evening, it was nine hours of Ken Burns' "The War." When I did sleep last week, I had nightmares.

Some hells are *not* of a person's making. The hell of conflicts like the Civil War and World War II, the work and makings of men whose agenda are still a matter of controversy, ... the hell of war is often borne by the innocents. Civilians – and military personnel who fight others' battles, don't know much less care about the reasons for war. Instead, they only know the horrors "of" the hell that is war. Today's wire services and printed press speak of the hell veterans experience once they return from war – and in the case of our current conflicts, the economic "hell" of job loss. Other hells – of disease, hunger, abandonment, fear, distrust, confusion, depression – many of these are also all too often beyond the control of those who experience it.

More than forty years ago, in an elementary Sunday School class at an Army Chapel in Munich, Germany, we were asked to define heaven and hell. My words, plagiarized from some unknown source were hardly unique. My description of heaven and hell were simple: heaven was “to be with God” and hell was “to be away from God.” Although my wording was understandingly simplistic and elementary, even at the age of ten, I was convinced that heaven and hell were not so much places that were “up and down” as they were states of being – and that one didn’t have to wait for the end of one’s life to experience heaven or hell. Oh, to be sure, I knew words of Scripture like the one I just read, passages that were quite descriptive, that gave credence to the theory that heaven is somehow “up” and that hell is somehow “down,” that heaven is a place of incredible well-being and that hell is a place of great discomfort if not torment. However, I was just as convinced that there were many examples of “hell on earth” and that as Christians, we are to strive for the opposite, for moments of grace, moments of hope, moments of neighborliness, moments that give us more than just a glimpse, but let us have the actual experience of God’s presence: a taste of heaven.

It was while living in Munich during the first half of the 60’s that West German television broadcast a series about German atrocities during the Second World War. Not quite twenty years had passed and the West German government decided it was finally time to mention the unmentionable, that the German people were not as innocent during the 1930’s and 1940’s as they wanted to believe, that in many ways *all* of them were in some ways culpable for some of the most horrific acts in human history. It was strongly recommended children *not* watch the broadcasts, but I remember looking around the doorway of our living room with incredible interest and at the same time revulsion at the all too graphic scenes from Auschwitz and Dachau. The Nazi regime meticulously recorded all of their deeds. They were scenes of hell on earth.

Some hells *are* of our own making. Sometimes, humans can be their own worst enemy. Our reading from the Gospel of Luke, about heaven and hell in the afterlife – is it also not about the heavens and hells of our own making here on earth – of the vast chasms between hope and despair, giving of oneself and greed – of all that is of God and all that is not? Let us be clear: neither Jesus, whose words are recorded in the Gospels or Paul, as in writings like today’s from 1 Timothy, condemn wealth per se. Instead, our faith warns us about the energy that goes into seeking and craving wealth, of having wealth become one’s “god” and then, if wealthy, of holding it so close to the vest that we ignore how generosity can change the lives of those in need – *and the life of the giver*.

Imagine, if you will, the man described as dressed in regal purple, ... how is it he could go both back and forth from his home – at least once daily - and ignore Lazarus who sat at his gate? As badly as our contemporary Mr. Knaak feels for not having connected with a neighbor of twenty years, how could this man dressed in purple have turned his head, kept his eye blind, kept his ear deaf and not have his neglect deemed *intentional*? Did he become blasé about or so accustomed to the presence of this starving and diseased man that he no longer saw or heard him? Worse yet, did he look with scorn on Lazarus as though Lazarus were a blight, an unnecessary part of his comfortable world? How could this man possibly have been at peace with himself? Did his conscience not nag at him at some basic, human level that suggested that to allow Lazarus to continue to live in a hell that was probably not of his making, that he, the rich man, was living apart from the ways and spirit of God, and was, in essence, living a hell on earth ... long before he experienced hell in the afterlife?

- How can a person, made in the image of God, look upon another in need or participate in the ways of injustice, greed, prejudice if not hatred and not feel hurt and pain – unless they have created such a chasm between themselves and God that they are living a hell of their own making?
- How could pilgrims to this land, many of whom sought freedom from oppression, turn around and oppress native peoples and not realize their behavior was hardly that of heaven?
- How can people of Spanish descent like those in Guatemala, not realize that people of Mayan descent are also human and that to exploit and ignore them and keep them out of the mainstream of modern society is to walk like the man in purple who ignored the needs of Lazarus who lived and slept at the rich man's gate?
- How could German citizens be convinced to distrust and hate people who for generations were their neighbors but then allow these neighbors to be hauled off in the middle of the night simply because they were Jews, gypsies or whoever the government of the Third Reich determined to be undesirable? What of Hutus in Rwanda convinced to butcher their Tutsi neighbors? What of Serbs suddenly convinced that Croats, Slovenians and Bosnians were enemies of the state? What of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd?
- How do we not read if not hear the words of Dante whose words challenge us from the cover of our worship bulletin?

As generous as some people are – and there are many of this congregation who *are* generous with their monies and their time and their talent – as much as people give of themselves and as much as a generous and loving heart reflects the ways of heaven, if the ways of hell are not confronted, if we stand back and wring our hands as though changing even our little corner of the world is beyond our control, if we pretend that to do no harm is sufficient, than Dante's words will fall as flat as those of Moses and the prophets did with the rich man of whom we read from the Gospel of Luke – of this man and his brothers who in their self-satisfaction and their self-absorption and their self-centeredness lived absent from the ways of God during their lives and would do so in the afterlife in what we call hell. For Dante to write,

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.

goes to the heart of Christ's call to us today – that if *anyone* is living a hellish life, of their own making or otherwise, that all of us are far from the ways of heaven. To live in the ways of heaven means working so that everyone enjoys the blessings of God, the blessings of the Almighty's creation, the blessings of Christ's redemption and the blessings born of the Holy Spirit moving in and through us in the here and now. To live in the ways of heaven means that all of us know the blessings of God's grace, the blessings of reconciliation, the blessings of peace and justice, the blessings of enough food and water to sustain life and the blessings of hope-filled lives. If, on the other hand, we stand back and do nothing, contribute little, and care even less, the result will be a hell of our own making. If we step up and do whatever we can, contribute as generously as we might, and care at and from the very center of our hearts and souls, the result will be a taste of heaven – here on earth and, in due time, with God for all the ages.

It is ours to choose. Choose blessings! Choose grace! Choose peace! Choose heaven!

Amen.