

To Hell and Back

God loved. God gave. God saved.

Focus: Jesus came not to condemn, but to save and make whole. This message is for all people because “the kingdom of God is the dimensions of God.”

Function: To enable hearers to perceive the good news that God loved; God gave; God saved. And it is out of this hope that you are able to claim and name God and speak a word of hope to others.

- I. **Opening: Images of Hell:** There are three times that a particular word is used in this gospel reading; it is a word that we do not talk about much or think about, yet it is a place we sometimes tell people to go to – hell. I want you to think about three different ideas/images of hell.
 - A. **Biblical place:** In history, a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem was called “the valley of Ben Hinnon.” It is where child sacrifices to pagan gods took place by unfaithful and rebellious Israelites (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:31-32; 19:2-6); later, this same valley was used as a garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem. In the New Testament, and in the gospel passage, the Greek word for hell is Gehenna and it is derived from the Hebrew name for valley to describe the place of final punishment – a picture of rubbish, bones and decaying carcasses; a place of despair and utter separation. (It sounds like a graphic preview for an R-rated horror movie that you don’t want your children to see.)
 - B. **Modern place:** give a description of modern garbage dumps. Picture our own garbage dumps. We decide what to discard and throw away. We are a nation of excess who does not always think about the consequences for others regarding our actions surrounding dumps.
 - C. **Emotion/Feeling:** We even do the same to people/or people feel like they are considered garbage.
 1. Story of woman in Huntington’s disease unit – “My family dumped me here because they don’t want me.”
 - D. **Hell, whether Gehenna, our own garbage dumps or the feeling of being discarded represents an utter separation from the presence of God is included within the warnings of Jesus in our gospel reading.**
- II. **Middle: Warnings:** The warnings include finger pointing, rebuking, and punishment.
 - A. **First, the finger pointing:** John has to tattle on a man he does not know. . . “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” (Come on, John, is it really a problem that the man wasn’t following you? Is it not more important to be following Jesus? Priorities. Hmm. Finger pointing. Looking at others before us. Sounds like a story I once heard about seeing the spec in someone else’s eye

instead of the log in your own eye.) And anyway, if we look in the gospel of Matthew about Jesus being astonished that the person he meets with such great faith is a Centurion (a Gentile, not one of the Jews, the chosen people of Israel!) Working outside the boundaries, etc. “Be careful of our finger pointing,” we are told.

- B. Second, Jesus rebukes John for what he said. Not only that, he tells John NOT to stop the man – regardless of the fact that he is not their follower – because “no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.” (Can we REALLY underestimate the workings of the kingdom of God? Is not God at work even OUTSIDE of the boundaries that we, as believers, place upon places, spaces and others?)
- C. Third, the warning of punishment and hell – Do not put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me. It would be better to be thrown into the sea, lose a hand, a foot or an eye. . . than to go to hell. Jesus is SO dramatic here, don’t you think? Does he really need to exaggerate so much in order to get his point across? Apparently, he does because there are times after this that the disciples still do not get it and times that we ourselves still do not get it. (Feeling guilty and bad about yourselves yet? About Jesus’ warnings to others and to you?)

III. Middle: Belief in Jesus

- A. However, it is not about frightening people into doing what is right or frightening them into believing in Jesus! Thankfully, the warnings do not have the final word. Jesus is not telling John, the disciples, or anyone else, to go to hell, but wants them to be with him. We have an advantage over the disciples because we know the rest of the story – Jesus himself has been there. In the Apostle’s Creed, we confess that Jesus DESCENDED INTO HELL. While some of what that means remains a mystery, we do know that Jesus knows/experienced hell – the place of the dead/a garbage dump/feeling discarded and forgotten. And even more so, Jesus enters places that we ourselves avoid and is with the discarded and forgotten people – whatever we may label them today – those on the outside, the margins, the wrong side of the tracks – “those people.”
- B. Jesus wants all people to be with him, not to go to be separated from God. In, with and through Jesus you are offered an alternative because Jesus did not just descend into hell and stay there; “on the third day he rose again.” You are offered that saving alternative not by your own doing, but by the doing of God. And it is out of that saving Word that you can “enter hell” – enter those places and speak a word of hope to another person knowing that it is God who saves.

IV. Ending

- A. It is this message that we read in Scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).” Out of that belief that you claim and name God’s work in you and in our world. God loved. God gave. God saved.

- B. May the peace that transcends all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Helpful Resources: [The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible](#); [Pulpit Resource](#); [Lection Aid](#)