

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

"A Hell of A Sermon"

Of all of the many topics in the Bible one of the most difficult to talk or hear about is hell. It is not a joking or a laughing matter. Hell is a real, physical place, full of suffering and pain. Every sermon that is preached from this church has to somehow come up with a title so we can put it on the internet – on our website in written form and its recorded form – and I prayed about it, and I thought about it – what am I going to call this sermon? I started to laugh yesterday as I was finishing it – and I came to the title “a Hell of a Sermon.” Did you know that in the Bible, Jesus spoke of hell more than He spoke of heaven?

The Bible has a lot to say about hell. There is an awareness of surroundings and those around you. Holy Scripture teaches that a persons' life does not end at death, but continues on forever—either in eternal glory with the Lord in heaven or in hell for eternal punishment. Hell is a place of eternal suffering reserved for the wicked and ungodly - just look at verse 24 of today's Holy Gospel and the rich man's agony crying out in the flames for Father Abraham to have Lazarus dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. There is no water in hell – it is the exact opposite of what we have here on earth.

Jesus taught that there is indeed a real place of eternal punishment for those who are condemned before God. In Matthew 5:22 Jesus said *“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.”* In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus taught us that *“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”* In Matthew 23:33 Jesus warns *“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”* Don't worry – this message is not full of all bad news – we are going to finally get to the hope and the promise for those who believe in Jesus.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus tells us again and again of the importance of avoiding hell – and its' damnation. In Luke 10:15 – Jesus warns the cities in the Galilee that they need to repent. *“And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths.”* And in Luke 12:5 Jesus gives us further clarification not only of hell – but of its chief tenant - saying *“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”* I could go on and on - but I think you get my point.

Jesus implicitly reminds us that Satan is real, hell is real – and it is not what today's culture has reasoned it out to be – a place for a 'time out' – until you've finished your penalty. No matter how any movie or book can jokingly dramatize Satan or hell, the fact remains that it is a place that no Christian wants to be – for you would be separated for all eternity from Jesus – the

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 29, 2019, Year C

King eternal, the Prince of Peace (in our reading this morning), the way, the truth and the life - forever! Since Jesus is not present in hell – then there’s no WAY in hell; there is no way to rest in hell – and there is no way out – ever!

There is a Christian band named the Newsboys who I have worked with, they are very popular with Marilyn and myself. We saw them last year at Wild Adventure, I have worked with them many times, and played their songs on the radio, and we will be backstage with them in Jacksonville in November to spend some time with them before their concert. They have a song, which is a parody – but it makes the point. It is called “Breakfast.” They sing: “When the toast is burned and all the milk has turned, and Captain Crunch is waving farewell; when the big one finds you – may this song remind you - that they don’t serve breakfast in hell!” Think about that. I talked about there being no water in hell, there is nothing that you would find familiar in hell. All kidding aside – it is Biblical and I believe it is clear that hell is no walk in the park, no cake walk, no wild eternal party that is just waiting to happen. You know what? It is called hell for a reason!

Non-Christians often ask Christians: "How can the God of love allow any of His creatures to suffer unending misery in hell?" The real question is, how can a just God not? God doesn't send anybody to hell – people send themselves! The fact that God is love makes hell necessary. God is the One who respects our choices and our decisions – giving us the freedom to seek Him or make a total mess of things. You’ve heard me say this many times here at St. Andrew’s in the last five years, “God loves us, but He does not, and never will force His love or force Himself on us.” God allows us to decide – and to choose.

- He loves us,
- He encourages and awaits our response,
- He pursues us,
- He urges us, but He does not force us, because He respects us.

Hell is the terrifying reality of never-ending punishment; it is the place -

- “*where the fire never goes out.*” (Mark 9:43).
- Hell is the “*eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41). Did you notice the word ‘prepare?’ This horrible place was prepared for the devil and his angels and is the exact opposite of the place that Jesus went “*to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*” (John 14:2-3) I don’t know about you – but I want to go to the place that Jesus prepared for me, and not to the place that has been prepared for Satan and his demons.
- Hell is a “*fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 13:42, 50). Jesus wanted to impress this upon us – an indelible mark on our hearts and minds – and so He repeated this twice.
- Hell is a place of “*outer darkness*” (Matthew 22:13). There is no light! If God is not there – and God is light – there is no light! What a difference from heaven where the Lamb is

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 29, 2019, Year C

the light and there is no need of the sun or moon. God is light and love and the absence of God means darkness and no light and love at all!

- In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus tells us that hell is a place of torment – a separation from God, from our loved ones, and from the Kingdom of Heaven (Luke 16:23).
- Hell is a place of longing and remembrance: In Luke 16:25 *"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."* This is not God getting even with you for things you have done – this is God being a just God.
- There is a separation in hell from anything good: Luke 16:26 *"between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."* If we think that sin is just a separation from God – I want to suggest to you that this eternal chasm is far greater and wider than we can possibly imagine. Can you imagine that the one stranded on the other side of the chasm willingly forced God away through unrepentant sin. On Wednesday nights, we have been studying Paul's letter to the Romans, and I taught two weeks ago with a drawing of a chasm. There were two hillsides and a chasm in between. If sin separates us from God there is no way to get from one side to the other. There is no way to get across that great divide. I want to suggest to you that it is the cross that bridges that great divide. Think about that.

In verses 27-31 the rich man prayed for Lazarus to be sent back to his family to warn them, but Abraham warned him that they had Moses and the Prophets and so they already had fair warning in the Word of God, the writings of Moses and the Prophets. This man's prayer wasn't answered and never would be. It was too late! He pleaded for someone to come back from the dead to warn them. *"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:31)* Do you hear that? That people's hearts were hardened to the Word of God. Do you know someone who has come back from the dead – to warn you? I do!

Let's take this into today's world. The Bible tells us that if people ignore God's Word, and say that they are just a bunch of good stories – and ignore them and try to change it and sculpt it to what they desire and don't know Jesus the Christ, the One who came back from the dead, then they will join the likes of the rich man in the eternal seclusion of hell. Hell is not a party, but is punishment for all eternity.

I met a very nice man at a conference in Niagara Falls, NY in 2008 named Bill Weiss who had a vision that he witnessed on November 23, 1998. He got ready for bed and went to get a glass of water, and then was given a vision. He wrote a book about that event called '23 Minutes in Hell.' He said this was not a near death experience but a vision. He said, "My sincere hope is that this book is the closest you will ever come to experiencing hell for yourself" It was not a near death experience, but an out of body experience. He said that he saw the searing flames of hell, felt total isolation, and experienced the putrid and rotting stench, deafening screams of

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 29, 2019, Year C

agony, terrorizing demons, and finally, the strong hand of God lifting him out of the pit. He said the Lord told him to "Tell them I am coming very, very soon!"

Wiese's visit lasted just twenty-three minutes, but he returned with vivid details etched in his memory. Since this life-changing ordeal, he has spent the seven years studying the Scriptures to find answers and has listed more than 150 Bible verses referencing hell. He said "Even if you don't believe my story, I hope you will believe the Scriptures and avoid hell just the same." As a Christian, when you understand how severe hell is you will be much more appreciative of your own salvation from which you were saved from. It should also cause us to have a passion for the lost – and to want to tell others what Christ has done for you.

No one has to go to hell. God has made a way of escape. We are turning the corner from all of those stories – to the Good News. Our loving God has given to each one of us our personal "Fire Insurance." Not one Person here today will have to spend even a heartbeat in Hell because of Jesus Christ! Jesus went to the cross to take on our punishment paying the price for our sins – which would have been an eternity in hell – and it cost Him everything! Because Jesus went to the cross – we don't have to.

God gave us clear directions to His house. If you wanted to get to my house – I would give you directions just how to get there. If you decided that you wanted to go south on 441, then I am going to take 82 towards Waycross, you are not going to get there! God gave us directions to His house, the place where Jesus went to prepare for us, and if you decide to take another path – you will not get there and cannot get there, because there is only one way to His house. Do you hear what I am saying? All we have to do is follow His clear directions and we will get there. He could not be more specific. Jesus said in John 3:36 "*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*"

God is waiting for you to receive Him as Lord of your life. If you don't know Him, or have never fully accepted Him as God's Only Son then I urge you today – to receive Jesus. Today is the day and now is the hour that you can with certainty be assured of never seeing hell, and instead be able to spend eternity in the glorious presence of the One who loves you so much and forgives all your sins. Jesus' invitation is real and He asks people to ask Him into your life, to be your Savior and to be your Lord. He lovingly says: "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*" (Revelation 3:20)

The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9-11 "*That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."*"

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 29, 2019, Year C

I know I am “preaching to the choir” this morning, but all of us have family, all of us have loved ones who are teetering, who aren’t sure. The best thing we can do is pray for them, to love them, to remind them of the One who loves them enough to come back from the dead.

And so, I need to ask you, and this is a question that you can ask your family, your loved ones. Do you want to live in His House? Then you have to do it His way. There is only one Way and His Name is Jesus.