



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School  
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

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**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 2, 2020**

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**“Contending with God on the Topic of Hell”**

*(Matthew 7:13-14)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt. 7:13-14).*

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing  
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

**Collect:** Almighty and ever-living God, as Your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in the substance of our flesh, grant that we may be presented to You with pure and clean hearts; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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I received an email from a member this last week. In it, she wrote, “So I was having a discussion with a friend of ours. He is an ELCA Lutheran and does go to church. He asked me if I believe God is good. I said yes of course. He then asked how I can believe in hell, [for] he believes God will not send good people to hell and after they die God will give them another chance to believe in Christ.” Our member reminded him what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell and judgment and that there are no promises for another chance after death. But the man dismissed the Bible as full of stories and dreams. Surprised, our member sent him a writing by Martin Luther on the validity of the Bible and then asked me, “Any other ideas how to approach this?” (I think our member did an exemplary job of addressing this.)

What about you? Have you had doubts about hell? Have you ever questioned how a God we know to be so good, merciful and compassionate could ever send people to hell, “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mk. 9:48)? Have you ever been tempted to downgrade the severity of hell, or the duration of it? I know I have. Eternal damnation is the single most difficult and offensive teaching in all Scripture. As I started to respond to our member, it occurred to me I have never really preached on the topic. So, committed to preaching the whole counsel of God, here goes.

First this. Those who take Scripture seriously, and those who take Jesus seriously, must also take eternal damnation seriously. To dismiss hell as a myth is to dismiss of Scripture and Jesus. It was Jesus who said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). It was Jesus who said the “gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt. 7:13). It was Jesus who ended one parable with the words, “Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer

darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 22:13). It was Jesus who explained how on the Day of Judgment, all people will be gathered before him and he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And to those on his right he will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” But to those on his left he will say, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25).

These and many, many more passages in Scripture plainly acknowledge the truth of eternal damnation. The only way to get around them is to take out your scissors and cut them all out, leaving your Bible in tatters. Therefore, 1) Those who take Jesus seriously and the Bible, must also take hell seriously.

Second, many want a “loving” God made in their own image, a God who is so loving he never gets angry at sinners nor holds sinners accountable. But think about that. Loving people get angry, precisely because of their love. We have parents here who absolutely love their children. Yet when those children harm themselves with drugs or other risky, self-destructive behaviors, the parents get angry – really angry. The opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. If God is indifferent to our sin, if it doesn’t bother him much, we just lost our Savior, for an indifferent God would never go to the cross. But the fact is, God hates sin but loves us, and it’s his love that drove him to the cross. When we reject him through unbelief, he’s not indifferent, and, given what he suffered on the cross for us, doesn’t he have that right?

Third, a common perception in our society is that God sends people to hell, but it would be far more accurate to say that hell is first and foremost a choice made by people. Jesus stands at the door and knocks time and again, but usually he is ignored or even told to buzz off. And he respects us enough to do that. He’s not going to bust down the doors and force his way in. That’s the way of tyrants and dictators, but not of our God. No, he respects us as persons made in his own image and given the freedom to reject him. Therefore C.S. Lewis said hell is “the greatest monument to human freedom.” It’s for those who use their freedom to walk away from the open arms of the crucified Messiah. It’s only unbelief that damns us. Mark 16, “He that believes and his baptized shall be saved. He that does not

believe shall be damned” (v. 16). Luther said the same. “We prepare this doom for ourselves. We could, to be sure, have a better lot; but we do not want the better lot” (What Luther Says, p. 625). Again, C. S. Lewis said, ‘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, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in hell chose it” (The Quotable Lewis, p. 293). To the very end, they are successful rebels.

If we reject hell, what are we asking God to do? To wipe out sins and give people a fresh start? He’s already done that. To love them and forgive them and be their Savior? He’s done all that, but many people don’t want him or acknowledge him or feel they need his forgiveness. So what are they asking of Jesus. To leave them alone? Yes, that’s ultimately what they want, and God gives them what they want. That’s one thing hell is, a place where no one will ever more be pestered by God.

Said another way, what kind of God would we have if He didn’t allow us to reject Him? To me, that sounds very much like North Korea’s Kim Jong-un. But our God will coerce no one into the faith, nor is any human being ever restrained from believing.

Fourth, God’s judgment and wrath can distress us, but wouldn’t it also be distressing if God didn’t get angry at injustice . . . if he just let it go? Miroslav Volf is a Croatian Protestant theologian who teaches at Yale. He witnessed the terrible violence and wickedness of the warfare in the Balkans. He maintains that divine vengeance is very unpopular in America in part because of our soft, peaceable and prosperous lives. To desire a God who does not rise up in wrath against injustice requires the quiet, predictable, prosperous life of a suburban home. However, in a land soaked in the blood of the innocent, that notion invariably dies.

His point? Wouldn’t it be distressing if God didn’t get angry at injustice? Wouldn’t it be distressing if God promised to accept everyone into heaven, even those who hate him, his people and his commandments? Would you invite anyone who hates you to live with you and your children in your house forever? Psalm 53 says the wicked “eat up my people as they eat bread”. They are “corrupt”, and their deeds are “abominable”. He’s not indifferent to that and doesn’t intend to tolerate that.

Instead, we have the promise that God will separate us his people unbelievers, and quarantine them, and isolate their wickedness from us.

But what about us? Isn't there sin and wickedness in us? Absolutely. But, by grace, there's also faith that receives his forgiveness and his salvation in Christ. Unbelievers don't feel need for that, and God will not suddenly change them at the end against their will. But for his believing people, there's the promise he will transform us in heaven so there will be no more sin or crying or pain or death.

Finally, could it be that God has reasons for hell that we simply cannot understand? I think sometimes we assume we *should* be able to understand God. His ways and thoughts *should* make perfect sense to us. But is that really reasonable? If there is an all-knowing, all-powerful God, then we would expect His motives, in many cases, to be unknown to us. My dog Toby does not understand why I do everything that I do. For example, why I choose to leave him every day, or why I allowed that bad man to do surgery on his privates. Just because Toby doesn't understand my decisions or like them does not make my decisions wrong. Moreover, for Toby and I to have a good relationship, he doesn't need to understand all my decisions.

Just because I do not understand God's ways and thoughts, does not make them wrong. What it means is He is God and I am not. And to assume I *should* be able to understand all his decisions sounds to me a lot like idolatry. And to set myself up in judgment over God, demanding he justify himself and his decisions before me, that *very much* sounds like idolatry. Whenever we start thinking "If I were God, I would do it this way", that's a 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment sin for which we need to repent and ask forgiveness.

There is an alternative. Proverbs 3, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him" (vs. 5). Trust he is who he says he is: good, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, quick to forgive, desiring that all should be saved, working toward that as well. Trust that he is not indifferent to the fate of unbelievers. He loves them too. Trust that he is doing all he can for them. And trust also that he is just, as the Bible says he is (Deut. 32:4). Do you believe that? Then trust that he will judge justly. Our justice is rough, (yours, mine, mankind's) how we judge one another, how

we size one another up on the bases of appearance, skin color, age, educational degree, even the cars we drive. Our judgments are pathetic. But Jesus? Isaiah 11: “He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge . . . and with equity” (v. 3).

So then, instead of cutting the Bible into shreds so that it doesn't dare offend us, and instead of trying to pry God off his throne for being unjust, let's harness that energy and use it to shepherd others into the merciful arms of our Savior, arms that are wide open to them, whatever they've done. Only unbelief damns us. There's no sin so big or ugly that he cannot forgive it. Only unbelief. All other sin God can wash away with the blood of the Lamb.

One last thing: please remember what God has done to save us from hell. Hell is first and foremost the experience of utter isolation from God. It is the one place in all the universe where God is not present and not listening, a place of utter abandonment. On the cross, Jesus experienced that. Remember how he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” There was no answer, only silence from the Father. Jesus was experiencing complete isolation from God. For all eternity, the Father loved his Son Jesus. We cannot fathom then what it meant for Jesus to lose the love of the Father. But that happened on the cross. Jesus was no longer God's beloved Son, he was only guilty and damnable for your sin and mine. Quarantined with our sin, isolated there on the cross, Jesus experienced hell for us. He did that to one day put an end to evil and suffering without putting an end to us.

Soren Kierkegaard said there are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true. Hell is real. It is a fearful truth. But if you're in a burning skyscraper, with three stairwells blocked by fire and smoke and the fourth all clear, you're not going to stand around and make a fuss that it's not fair, or just or compassionate. You're going to use that one stairwell that leads to light and life and you'll praise God for it.

Thanks be to God who sent his Son Jesus Christ to be the Way to the Father. Thanks be to God that through Christ we can escape the pains of hell. Thanks be to God that he who died on the cross will also do at least as much as he has promised to save us. In fact, he will stretch his promises to the breaking point in order to save us, because of his love for us.

Perhaps then instead of being scandalized by the reality of

hell, we should marvel and give thanks for the reality and the promise of heaven. Amen.

