

How to Go to Hades
September 26, 2010
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ

My Hebrew Scripture professor Greg Mobley had a great story about being raised as a Christian in the South. Greg said that when he was growing up, two things were made perfectly clear—“Sex is dirty *and shameful*, and you share it with the one you love...*and* God loves you and is going to send you to Hell.” Talk about your mixed messages!

But that’s the rub, isn’t it? We Christians talk about God being all loving, compassionate, wise, merciful, and *well* beyond us in *all* these virtues...but then there is Hell in the mix somehow. Now, the reason I fell in love with Jesus in the first place was all the stories about him abiding in God, and inviting us to do the same. Not to mention Christ’s perpetual acts of healing and solidarity with any who were considered a little suspect, or even total outcasts. And we are led to believe that these acts of Jesus are, in fact, demonstrations of *God’s own character*—that God wants to heal *us*, dwell with *us*, and love us into being our best selves instead of the scattered and broken people we so often are instead. Then today, we hear this story about a place of torment for some, contrasted with a place of abiding peacefully for others. A story of judgment and condemnation. Where is our all loving God in this story?

Now, one expression of pulpit freedom I have heard from some other preachers is the right *not* to preach a text. I have known several preachers who would encourage me to preach something other than this passage today, or *any* day...to just avoid it. It is a tempting thought. Yet, ultimately as *disciples* I feel we need to find ways to believe in, reach for *and touch* God’s grace even when the way to it seems like it is on the other side of a great chasm we simply cannot cross.

I have always struggled with the idea of God judging and condemning us because I have never felt judged or condemned by God. Not that I don’t deserve condemnation, and not that I haven’t felt it from other people on occasion, and even from myself on bad days. But I have never, ever felt it from God. God has always been my joy and uplift. And I think that is the crucial clue for my own way of unlocking this challenging text from Luke.

Where *is* God in this morning’s reading? Did you notice? Our Creator is, in fact, completely absent—implied perhaps, but never named directly. Not only that, but the setting of the story is instructive. There are two realms beyond those of this world where the story unfolds—the bosom of Abraham, which is where Lazarus goes, and the destination of the rich man. In the Bible translation we use for our worship services—the New Revised Standard Version—the region in question is called *Hades*, which was the original ancient Greek word used in the text.

Less diligent translations render it as “Hell.” There are significant differences between Hell and Hades. The word Hell actually comes to us through Norse mythology, and it has been used to denote a place of fire and torment, quite like the description of the rich man’s destination. Hades, on the other hand, is a realm from Greek and Roman myths and known to Jesus and his followers through their Roman oppressors. Hades is generally more like the Jewish region of Sheol—a place where *all* the dead find their resting place, namely—the grave. In later Greek myths, a certain section of Hades, known as Tartarus, did become an area of torment reserved for the wicked at the lowest point in creation. So, Jesus may have been using Hades as shorthand for Tartarus here.¹ But the important thing to notice is that Jesus is borrowing *from another tradition to make his point!*

Since there was no commonly agreed upon afterlife realm other than Sheol in Jewish tradition at that time, Jesus had to borrow from another culture to make his point. That is an odd move to make, don’t you think? Why is Jesus placing the story squarely in someone else’s myth? I believe it is to emphasize the fact that it is a parable—that is to say, an imaginative story intended to express something about our lives *right now*, and not in the life to come. Why else would he set it in another culture’s afterlife when Jews were so particular about keeping their tradition apart from the traditions of surrounding cultures?

We can add to the imaginary setting two important things. First, God is only being implied in this story. Next, there are significant differences in the imagined post life journeys of Lazarus and the rich man. Did you notice how Lazarus made his way to the bosom of Abraham? Here is the language from the text again: “The poor man died and was carried away *by the angels* to be with Abraham.”² Here is where God is *implied*, because angels are usually understood to be working for the Holy One, unless otherwise indicated, like when the book of Revelation refers to Satan’s angels.³ Now, who knows the literal meaning of “angel?” It *does not* mean harp playing winged humanoid with a halo. Nor a chubby winged baby. Those are images we laid on the word long after the Bible was written. It is from an ancient Greek word that means “messenger.” So, a more revealing translation of that line might go something like this: “The poor man died and was carried away *by the messengers of God* to be with Abraham.” Or even—*the message of God* is that Lazarus—the poor and downtrodden man—was reconciled with his faith and people through divine intention. In other words—we are divinely intended to be in relationship with one another in comforting and supportive ways. This echoes the messages of comfort to many poor and outcast people in the Beatitudes⁴; Mary’s song the Magnificat,⁵ and the overall arch of Christ’s ministry.

¹ <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/tartarus.html>.

² Luke 16:22 a.

³ Revelation 12:9.

⁴ Matthew 5.

⁵ Luke 1.

Intriguingly, God's presence, and even the presence of God's message or messengers, is not even *implied* in the transition of the rich man to Hades. The text goes like this: "The rich man also died and was buried. In *Hades*, where *he was...*"⁶ There appears to be an instant transportation from burial mound into Hades for the rich man. Poof, he is there! There are no angelic hosts to bring him. Likewise, no daemonic consort drags him below, either. So, *why* is that? Why is one dead person *escorted* to their celestial destination, and the other just shows up there? What are we to glean from that?

I think that the rich man actually put *himself* in Hades. Not as some sort of experience of divine retribution in the afterlife, but through earthly actions *during* his earthly life. The setting of the afterlife may be to underscore the spiritual realities at play in everyday life. Outwardly the rich man was well dressed, and "feasted sumptuously every day."⁷ But he had a blind spot. There was a veritable chasm between him and his God. There was a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between him and the traditions of his people, symbolically represented in Abraham. Because, "at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table..."⁸ The rich man didn't even offer Lazarus crumbs from his table! He had heard the saying of the prophets, he knew the laws of Moses, and he turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the suffering of his fellow humans. Day after day, bloated on the false riches of the human world, the rich man walked by Lazarus when he could have joined in the true riches of fellowship with Lazarus through offering some food and company. That alone would have connected him to the Law of Moses, the prophets, Father Abraham and God in one fell swoop!

Yet, puffed up on worldly riches, adorned in fine material, and proud to bursting of his own accomplishments he turned away from maintaining relationship with other humans and God. And that surely is how to go to Hades, or Hell, or whatever you want to call it. And I think it is his self satisfied pride which makes him think he doesn't need Lazarus, or Father Abraham, or even God. And that pride supplies him with another blind spot: his need to repent; his need to turn back toward relationship with God and other humans.

Years ago as a produce manager I worked with a woman named Carol Bean, who had a saying about Hell. She said that Hell was realizing the difference between where we could be spiritually and the place we actually are. I think that's the great and seemingly fixed chasm that lay between the rich man and Lazarus, but I also think there is a way through it after all. A really simple way—what if he had repented? He never just repents!

⁶ Luke 16:22b-23 a.

⁷ Luke 16:19.

⁸ Luke 16:20-21a.

The rich man seeks mercy from Lazarus when he asks him to cool his tongue with water. But that is asking Lazarus to work for him, instead of admitting his wrongdoing. When he is denied this, he tries again, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers about him so they can avoid his fate. But that means he is asking both Father Abraham *and* Lazarus to work for him—as if he should or could twist others and his faith to suit his desires. When he insists that his brothers will repent if they see someone from the dead, he is again rebuffed, because once again he wants others to work for *him!* But, *he* never simply repents.

It is my deepest faith that we can *always* repent, and that God does not give up on us on either side of the grave. This is not simply a grafting of my hopes onto this passage. The very next thing Luke talks about is forgiveness of repentance. In the first verse following today’s reading, Jesus says “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come...”⁹ In other words—we all make mistakes, some days we are the rich man and other days we are Lazarus. Shortly thereafter, Jesus talks about how to forgive the sins of others: “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, *you must forgive.*”¹⁰ We *must* forgive—and not just once either. Jesus says: “if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ *you must forgive.*”¹¹ Surely, if we stumbling and imperfect humans are called on to forgive those who repent so often, God is capable of even more forgiveness. But we do need to do our parts and fess up when we mess up, which is where the rich man falters.

Mindful of all these things, this morning’s parable becomes a reminder to honor God by honoring and caring for one another, reaching out to those in need, and remembering that forgiveness is always, always, always available to each and every one of us when we do so. May we all carry this truly good news with us into the week ahead.

Amen?

⁹ Luke 17:1.

¹⁰ Luke 17:3b-d.

¹¹ Luke 17:4.

Luke 16:19-31

19“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ 25But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ 27He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ 29Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 30He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”