

NOW IS THE TIME!  
SEVENTH AND FINAL SERMON IN THE SERIES ON THE "REAL" JESUS

EASTER SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 1986

In the Manteca church, where I was pastor for seven years, we invited the congregation to participate in the Prayer of Intercession by writing concerns on cards which the ushers would then hand to me to include in the prayer. One Sunday, Felicia, age eight, submitted this prayer. "Dear God, help me to feed the horses, and to keep my big mouth shut." Can't you hear her mother speaking? Who knows what concerns people bring with them to church--what problems, hurts, questions, struggles people need to tell God.

Especially on Easter, I wonder what all we have brought with us. I wonder what is it about Easter that brings us to worship. Habit? But habits wear thin after awhile. Do we come because spring is in the air and there is the promise of new life, new clothes, freshness? Do we come for the music and pageantry? I really anticipate Easter worship. In few places does God get worshipped like he gets worshipped here! In all my vast years of experience, I have not heard a choir like ours. Nowhere else have I heard an orchestra, much less an orchestra of the quality we have this morning. Nowhere else have I seen a procession of banners.

But, I suspect that we also come to Easter worship for deeper reasons. I believe Easter worship captures our imagination because we all desperately want to hope. We need to believe that there is more to life than our daily existence, that life is more than we experience it on this earth. We want to believe that God will triumph over pain, war, poverty, sickness and evil. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's demonstration of hope. By resurrecting Jesus from the dead, God won a decisive victory over the forces of evil.

What do we mean by the forces of evil? In the liberal, mainline denominations of this century, we have not heard much talk about the forces of evil, Satan or hell. The fundamentalist, conservative churches talk a lot about Satan and hell because the reality of evil is a central concept in conservative theology. Even psychiatry is beginning to take evil seriously. M. Scott Peck, author of the popular book, The Road Less Traveled, has also written People of the Lie. The lie is the denial of the reality of evil and Satan. But, Satan and hell have not been taken seriously by liberal churches. I heard on KKHI radio one morning, "The clergy have made considerable progress. It is as difficult for a person to get into hell these days as it was to get into heaven a century ago."

Easter loses its power and meaning unless it is seen against the backdrop of hell. Hope becomes confused and hazy unless we understand what it is we are hoping to escape. The kingdom of God is over against the kingdom of Satan. Throughout Lent, I have been preaching a series of sermons in pursuit of the "real" Jesus. We have looked at the man, his times, his determination, compassion, and his message. Jesus preached the urgency of the kingdom of God. "Repent and believe in the kingdom of God," was his message. He was terribly concerned about his world, his people, and what was happening. Jesus was thinking primarily about a political structure, not an imaginary kingdom, or even a metaphorical kingdom, but a visible kingdom. Jesus prayed, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." He prayed for a kingdom where all

people, especially the poor people, the disadvantaged, the oppressed, the mistreated, those who had been prejudiced against, the "least of these" in the eyes of the world, are treated equally, favorably, and compassionately, a kingdom where God is king.

But, what is the other side of Jesus' message? What if the kingdom of God is rejected? What happens to those who say, "no way"? If you are not with God, where are you? If you do not choose to live in the kingdom of God, where will you live? If you are not going to heaven in the next life, where will you go? To hell? Jesus preached with an urgency because he believed that either the kingdom of God would come, or the nation would be annihilated by the Romans. The annihilation came, and it was hell. Jesus' prophesy in Mark 13:14-17 came true,

Then those who are in Judea must run away to the hills. A man who is on the roof of his house must not lose time by going down into the house to get anything to take with him. A man who is in the field must not go back to the house for his cloak. How terrible it will be in those days for women who are pregnant and for mothers with little babies.

There are two dominant images in the gospels used to depict the place or condition or fate of those who will not listen and heed the call: outer darkness and a raging fire. The origin of the belief in hell as a fiery place was the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem called Gehenna. In Jesus' day, it was the garbage dump, but centuries before, the Canaanites had burned children alive there as human sacrifices to their gods. Gehenna was regarded by the people of Jesus' day as a wicked, unholy place. Who could imagine any worse fate than to be thrown into the garbage dump of Gehenna. To Jesus, the image probably meant, according to Albert Nolan in his book, Jesus Before Christianity (pg. 89), "Gehenna is the image of complete destruction, the extreme opposite of life."

Jesus observed that this world is dominated by evil. Life is not easy in this world. Living your life successfully is not easy. God has created a magnificent universe---the grandeur of Yosemite, the healing movement of the ocean as it washes not only the shore but our spirits, the majesty of a redwood tree, the smile of a baby. It is a beautiful world, but it is not easy for us to enjoy the beauty, retain the beauty, or live beautiful lives. Jesus was a realist. He said in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction (hell), 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."

It's easy to fail. It's easy to yield to temptation. It's easy to destroy your marriage. It's easy to blow up this planet. It's easy to retaliate an eye for an eye. The way is easy that leads to hell. I'm old enough now to observe, often with tremendous pain, how many of my peers, colleagues and even close friends have made their lives a hell---ruined their marriages, alienated their children, and destroyed their careers. We are told that males go through a mid-life crisis; some of them don't go through it, they stay there! It is a fine line we walk. Hell is dangerously close on all sides. The way is easy, said Jesus, that leads to hell.



What is hell? In next Sunday's sermon, we will look at heaven, but for this morning, what is hell? Hell is that horrible experience when your behavior or desires cause you to look deep within you and hate what you see. Hell is when you know that the front you put up for the world to see is not the real "you." Hell is when you worry, even agonize, that those who love you would not love you anymore if they only knew the real "you." James Baldwin in his novel, Just Above My Head, (pg. 394), writes, "It is better to be furious with someone you love, or be frightened for someone you love, than be put through the merciless horror of being ashamed of someone you love." Hell is when you act in such a manner that your spouse, friends, parents, or children are ashamed of you, and children who are ashamed of their father or mother go through hell.

Hell is the preoccupation with death and evil. Matthew Fox in his fascinating book, Original Blessing, writes (pg. 33)

"On his deathbed the great psychologist and lover of the human race Erich Fromm turned to his friend Robert Fox and asked, 'Why is it, Bob, that the human race prefers necrophilia to biophilia?'" Fox elaborates, "A significant question, this, why do we prefer love of death to love of life? Missiles to celebration? Power-over to power-with? Greed to letting go?"

Hell is when death overpowers life, when hate overpowers love, violence overpowers reason, and war overpowers diplomacy. Now we are playing dangerous games with Libya in a "get tough" policy. Eva Pugitt, spouse of the United Methodist minister in Orinda, has written a book called, He Hit Me Back First. When a second grader was asked how a fight got started, the reply was, "He hit me back first." It is that kind of provocative policy we delight in using with Libya and Central America that is frightening. Will the hell called the Vietnam War be repeated? Eleanor and I visited the replica of the Vietnam Memorial when it came to Stanford on tour several weeks ago. It is not only a tribute to those who gave their lives; but a stark jarring piercing cry---"Will this hell happen again?" The weather was appropriate for our visit---dark clouds, heavy rain, slippery, greasy mud, a time to weep.

Hell is a present, powerful, tempting reality; but we do have choices. A tourist asked St. Peter for a tour of heaven and hell. They first went to hell where he saw a large table loaded with delicious food, but everyone was starving to death. St. Peter explained, "They are required to eat with four-foot long chopsticks, but no one can get food into their mouths with four-foot long chopsticks, so they are dying of starvation." When they toured heaven, the tourist was surprised to see an identical table loaded with delicious food, but everyone was well fed and happy. "What type of eating utensils do they use here?" he asked. Peter replied, "Four-foot long chopsticks." "Then," the tourist asked, "why are all those in hell starving to death while those in heaven are well fed and happy?" "Because," answered Peter, "in heaven they feed each other." They who put the needs of others above their needs; they who feed someone else, rather than trying to feed themselves, find themselves fed in return and, in the process, discover heaven.

Jesus knew that hell was a present reality, but he believed and preached, "The kingdom of God is near." Satan is being deposed from his throne. The decisive battle was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter is the

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DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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celebration and the anticipation of God's ultimate victory over evil. Easter is the experience of God's breakthrough. The choice is yours: heaven or hell, right now in your life, in your experience. Ultimate victory is in the future, but the foretaste, the certainty, and the joy can be yours now.

Now is the time! Now is the occasion! Now is the moment of God's breakthrough. God can break through when you make choices of lifestyle, morality, work, struggle, and pain. In the midst of bad times, tough times, sad times; in the midst of hell, the best times God has to offer are also available. The choice is yours. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that Christ is uniquely present here and now, to rescue you from hell, to keep you from hell, to hold you in God's will. The Lord is risen!