



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 13, 2011

The First Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong

at 5:30pm

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Joel C. Daniels

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HE DESCENDED INTO HELL

(Apostle's Creed Series, Sermon 7)

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

“He descended into hell.” We have to proceed with extreme caution when we dare to speak of divine things, and with all the more fear and trembling when we delve into mysteries about things like places of the dead, “that undiscovered country,” as Hamlet called it; and how much more about that mystifying time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Meister Eckhart was a 13th century mystical theologian, and in a sermon one time said, “Don’t chatter about God; for when you chatter about him, you’re telling lies and sinning...”¹ Just by opening your mouth. He knew that there are certain mysteries that are unable to be uttered, and trying to was a sure path to error. He knew that his soul was in jeopardy every time he stepped into the pulpit—it was an occupational hazard; it still is. We speak of the inner life of God at great risk and must proceed with great humility.

“He descended into hell.” When this series of sermons began, the Rector mentioned how creedal affirmations – “I believe in” – are different than affirmations of propositions – “I believe that...” To believe in, is to trust, to have faith—typically, faith in a person. I believe in my brother; I know him deeply, I know how he thinks, I know his life. I don’t know what he’s going to do with his life—and apparently he doesn’t either—but I believe in him. Not because I added up all the evidence, and decided that believing in him was the most rational course of action; that’s certainly not the case. I believe in him, at root, because I love him. That might not have been clear from the way I treated him the first decade or so of his life, but it is true.

So if saying “I believe in” is different than saying “I believe that” – if it is, in fact, at root about love, what is it that we’re believing in, in this unpleasant clause in the Apostles’ Creed? What was it that the early Church found, what was it they experienced, that caused them to believe in Christ’s descent into hell?

There are multiple traditions, multiple ways of approaching this question. There is one school of thought in which Christ’s time in hell was a time of intense and glorious activity. In this telling, Jesus descended into hell with a sword, slew the devil, ending his reign, and unlocked the chains that kept the dead in hell. It was a victorious Christ, in other words, who descended into hell, bringing hope to the land of the dead, bringing light to the darkness, which could not overcome it. This is the heroic model of Christ, and it has its justifications in Scripture and tradition.

I want to suggest a slightly different reading, also affirmed in Scripture and tradition, though again I mention it only with the greatest hesitation and humility.ⁱⁱ The issue seems to me to turn on the question of whether Jesus was alive in hell; alive, and thus heroic. I submit that we take very seriously, that we take literally, last week's creedal affirmation – Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried – and look at this week's "descent" in light of it.

And it seems to me that, if we do that, and if next week's clause is true—if what happened next was a true resurrection—then when Jesus went to the dead, he went as one of them. Those "spirits in prison" inhabiting hell had one thing in common: their being dead. And if Jesus was there in solidarity with them, if he was going to take on their nature, human nature, then he must have been there, with them, as one of them: which is to say, he must have been dead: crucified, dead, and buried.

The darkness of that Holy Saturday, then, that silent day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, comes from, it seems to me, this: that the Son of God was dead. If there was no death, there could be no resurrection. But if that's the case—if the Son of God was dead—then along with the death of Christ on that Holy Saturday went the death of hope. The disciples watched the stone being rolled in front of the tomb with a devastating finality. After those years of ministry, his preaching of the good news—preaching that drew out "all of Jerusalem," the Scriptures say, attracted crowds in the hundreds, in the thousands—after these words of life had been proclaimed, and community upon community filled with the expectation that this would change the world, that this would change everything—after this, then...nothing. The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did overcome it.

If he was not dead, if he did not suffer that fate, that would mean that in the human experience there are places to which Christ has not gone. If he has not shared in death, then he has not seen true desolation, true human desolation.

If, however, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, as Isaiah says, and if on him was laid the iniquity of us all,ⁱⁱⁱ then Christ went to the dead as a citizen of hell. Not as an ambassador from the land of the living; he did not visit the dead, but was dead. Jesus went to the dead as their brother; he went as one of them; he became one with their state one with their alienation from the Father. He was there as guilty as they were; guilty, and dead of sin. Not sin of his own: he was made sin who knew no sin^{iv}: he was guilty without transgression; guilty because he stood in front of the judge and cried: Here am I; send me.

And sent he was.

And he descended.

We believe in Christ's descent into hell because we trust. It is, at root, about love. We trust that in the broad and exhaustive overflow of God's love for us there is not one single place that is too far, too dark, too sinful, too barren of hope, that God himself does not reside there. We trust that he is "Lord ... of the living" and "of the dead."^v For the resurrection to mean anything besides spring time and flowers, we must have this: that Jesus went into the darkness, into the far country, the territory well beyond hope. So that there is no place we can ever go where he has not already been. Because he descended.

It wasn't a victorious Jesus that descended into hell, but a defeated Jesus. Not an active Jesus, with a sword, but a passive one, slain. Not a spotless lamb, but one heaped with the stain of sin, the sin of the whole world. Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, having been utterly abandoned by the Father, was dead: and he descended into hell.

Thanks be to God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Amen.

ⁱ The sermon is found in the volume on Meister Eckhart in the “Classics of Western Spirituality” series (Paulist Press, 1981), 177.

ⁱⁱ This reading bears the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially in *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000 [1970]). Though von Balthasar’s work has been extremely well-received in both Roman Catholic and Anglican theological circles, his reading of the *descendit* remains controversial. In the pro-Balthasar camp, see Edward T. Oakes, “The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), 184-99; in the anti-Balthasar camp, see especially Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light In Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of the Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 53:4, 6.

^{iv} 1 Corinthians 5:21

^v Romans 14:9.