Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone\* casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’39But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me.40Whoever is not against us is for us.41For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42 ‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me,\* it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.43If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,\* to the unquenchable fire.\*45And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.\*,\*47And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,\*48where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 ‘For everyone will be salted with fire.\*50Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?\* Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’

Notice something strange about today’s text? Look again at verses 43-48.

What you should see is that verses 44 and 46 are missing. Why? I’m not sure. I know, according to the notes in my Bible, that they are identical to verse 48 (where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched). According to the notes in my Bible, these verses are “lacking in the best ancient authorities.” Someone added verses 44 and 46 to the Greek text, perhaps to emphasize the consequences of sin – it’s bad enough to go to hell, but he wanted to remind you that it’s a place where “their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.”

Notice something about verse 48; the worms are *their* worms, making this quite personal. Who are *they*? Well, hopefully *they* are not *you or me*! Verse 48 is a quote from the book of Isaiah – the last verse of the last chapter of Isaiah – a scene describing the fate of those who have rebelled against God. It’s a description of what we commonly refer to as hell.

The idea of hell seems passé in our modern culture; the idea of eternal torment seems incompatible with the concept of a loving, forgiving God. Certainly the Bible itself places more emphasis on grace and eternal life with God than on punishment and eternal torment apart from God. Many modern churchgoers consider the idea of hell to be a scare tactic, a way to keep people in line under the threat of eternal damnation. It’s something that most pastors don’t like to preach and most congregations don’t like to hear about.

But here it is in today’s reading. Jesus mentions hell three times, describing it as a place of personal worms that never die and fire that forever burns. He says that it’s better to drown yourself, to cut off your own foot or hand or eye, than to be cast into hell. Jesus uses the Greek word *gehenna* for hell. Gehenna refers to an actual geographic location, the Valley of Hinnom, located near Jerusalem. It was a trash dump, full of burning garbage and even human corpses. It was considered a cursed place, in part because King Ahaz had conducted human sacrifice there in the eighth century B.C.E. Such a location would be the fate of any who stumbled or caused another to stumble.

Truth being told, we don’t know what hell is like any more than we know what heaven is like – are there really pearly gates and streets paved with gold in heaven? Is there a lake of fire? We just don’t know. But what we do know is that we believe in Judgment, a day when we stand alone before God and are held accountable for our actions. Some of you are here in church, I would assume, because you believe in a Judgment. Thankfully you don’t simply conceptualize God as some all-*tolerant* being that allows you to live in your transgressions and then simply excuse you as though all you did was belch – people who attempt to believe this tend to be those at the top of the food chain, those who have a greater *need* to be excused. But to believe such would be to believe that God has no desire or plan to redeem our world and establish justice – everyone could sin against God and neighbor with impunity. We can profess faith that Jesus died for our sins and our salvation comes by way of God’s grace, and this is certainly true, but we must also remember that the Bible tells us that Jesus died to save us from our sin, and that “faith without works is dead.” However we construe heaven or hell, we believe that God does indeed judge us.

I’ve noticed something about church membership: the age of the average adult member of a church is greater than the age of the average adult in the general population. And as life expectancy increases, the age of the average adult church member will likely increase. Why? Well, if we believe in a Judgment day, and we believe that it comes at the end of our lives, then we tend to procrastinate in considering it until we start to feel our lives here are approaching an end. When we’re young, we tend to devote our time and attention to *this* life, but as we approach the end of *this* life our mind considers more seriously the possibility of an *after*life. When I was a teenager, I had no interest in church, and I took the liberty of re-creating God in an image that was more compatible with my own lifestyle, an easygoing, casual, happy god, kind of a stoner. God was cool with everything that I did, even when I didn’t even think about God. But thank God that he showed himself to be a bit more engaging and demanding *and loving* than what I had assumed, a God who abhors injustice and does not tolerate sin. I am so thankful that there are young people among us who have come to understand this, who know that God has expectations of you, God does not take sin lightly.

And once you understand that God expects something from you, you also realize that Judgment is not a future event to be dreaded but something that is already occurring in your life. God isn’t sitting back and taking a tally of all your sins so that he can throw the book at you when you die. Your own spirit witnesses to the fact that God’s Spirit has already placed you under judgment. Every time you sin the Holy Spirit is reminding you that you need to stop it and placing you under immediate judgment. And as long as you think you can turn things around on your own, that you can get your act together and live a righteous life, you’re only digging a deeper hole. The only viable option you have is to repent and come to Christ in the hope that he will give you new life.

And he does! Because once you understand and believe that Christ has died for your sins, you no longer need to fear Judgment – Christ has covered that for you. Judgment no longer has to be something you dread or avoid, because you no longer have to fear condemnation. Does sin still cause pain? I hope so! If you speak to a silversmith, he would tell you that the act of refining silver involves fire, a fire that burns away impurities, a fire that strengthens and purifies the ornament that the smith is creating. So it is with us. As God purifies us, perfects us, we may feel the heat, especially when there is some impurity within us that needs to be destroyed. But we can celebrate the cleansing process. We can rejoice over our own purification. We can welcome Judgment knowing that it is part of God’s plan for turning us into the people that he wants us to be.