

To Hell and Back

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Lent, February 17, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 1 Peter 3:18-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

George Avery used to stop by and visit me in my office about once every other month. He was a member of my church in Kenmore, New York, a Deacon, and a deeply devout Christian. He'd stop by just to talk... and it was always about one thing. George had been a platoon leader in WWII. Two war time experiences etched themselves indelibly into his memory. One memory was that of a peaceful looking German farm house which was supposed to be a communications headquarters of the retreating German army. His orders were to destroy the farmhouse. I don't know what kind of weapons they used but George would vividly describe how the house exploded, burst suddenly into flames, and collapsed into rubble in a matter of minutes. Later, in examining the rubble, George found the bodies of a farmer, his wife and two small children. At the time it happen, he said, he felt nothing. All he remembered about his feelings was the complete absence of feeling.

The other memory George would share was the memory of how every man in his platoon, except himself, was eventually killed in the war. He was the only one to come back home. George felt that all his men were killed because of the orders he gave them. He constantly questioned whether he was a coward, had he exposed himself to the same dangers as his men?

After the war, George got a job at the Post-office. But he suffered repeated emotional breakdowns. Eventually George retired on disability related to his war time trauma. So every other month or so I could count on a knock on my study door. Sometimes we'd go to a restaurant. Sometime we'd go for breakfast. But always it was to help George exorcise the

demons that imprisoned him. I can still see George holding his head in his hands, his face painfully distorted, with silent tears streaming down his face. And I can still hear George saying, "What if I'd have done this? What if I'd have done that? I can't stop thinking of that farmhouse, that family, my men. It's been hell, Ted. Can hell be any worse than this?"

Some people would laugh if you ask them, "Do you believe in hell?" "Hell? That's something out of the middle ages. Modern people don't believe in hell." Others would say, "Sure, I believe in hell. The Bible teaches there's a hell, doesn't it? I believe what the Bible says." But George would say, "Believe in hell? I experience hell every day." If you've ever gone through a painful divorce, or lost a loved one, or experienced bitter disappointment you know that hell is real. If you've every known someone who struggles with alcoholism or drug addiction or homosexual tendencies or deep depression you too would know that there's a hell.

Hell is a prison. Hell is where you've lost your freedom and dignity. Hell is the outer darkness, the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the flame of desire and remorse that can't be extinguished. Hell is despair, regret, hopelessness. Hell is being all alone and lost, knowing not which way to turn or where to turn or where to go or evn why you should go on. On the gates of hell, Dante said, were inscribed, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter." You don't need to die before you experience hell. We all have our mini-hells. Mini-hells are as real as the bottomless pit.

Hell is one place where you don't expect to find God. And yet, the God we believe in as Christians is a God who has gone to hell and back. The God who created the universe isn't a stand-offish God who remains uninvolved. Many people believe in a God who created the world and left it to itself and to natural laws. But Christians believe in a God who gets involved, who

*Smedley:
"If you fall
into hell..."*

became a human being and who continues to be a human being with scars in his hands, feet and sides. Christians believe in a God who suffers with us. God is a God who goes to hell and through hell with us and for us. And this God has come to let us know that there's a way out of hell.

S. Peter tells us something very strange in our Epistle lesson. He's writing to suffering Christians, Christians who're going through hell. Remember how, when fire nearly destroyed the imperial city of Rome, the emperor, Nero, blamed Christians for starting the fire. Christians were arrested, tortured, crucified and set on fire. S. Peter writes, "Christ suffered also, for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark." Also, in chapter 4:6, Peter writes, "the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead."

These are among the most difficult verses in the Bible to understand. There are many interpretations but I want to share with you just one that has exercised great influence throughout the history of the church. It explains that troubling phrase in the Apostles' Creed, which so many Christians find hard to repeat, that Jesus "descended into hell."

Early in the history of the church the question arose, "What happened to the spirit of Jesus after the crucifixion and before his resurrection, when his body was buried in the garden tomb?" The answer that became popular was that Jesus went to hell, to the shadowy world of the dead, and preached the Gospel to the spirits who were in prison. Jesus went to those disobedient men and women who wouldn't listen to the preaching of Noah and who were destroyed in the flood. He went to all those who were imprisoned

in deaths dark bonds. He preached the Gospel to those who never had the opportunity to hear it in their life times.

We're not told how they responded. Perhaps they continued to hold out in their unbelief and disobedience. Perhaps the very presence of One whose love will not ever let them go will be hell for them as they sink deeper and deeper into the abyss in order to escape God's all embracing arms which reach down into the bottomless pit.

There's a verse in Psalm 139, verse 8 which says, "Lo, if I make my bed in hell, you are there." It reminds me of something that Sadhu Sundar Singh once said. Sundar Singh was an Indian who was converted to Christ as a young man in the early 1900s. He walked throughout India preaching the Gospel and travelled many times into Nepal and Tibet to preach the Gospel where it was forbidden. He suffered much for his faith in Christ but he suffered most because of his concern for his mother who never professed faith in Christ. He would often say, "If my mother should go to hell, I shall ask God to send me there." Surely, Sundar Singh was Christlike in saying this. God's love is a love that never lets go. Think of the parable of the lost sheep where the good shepherd says, "I will go after that which is lost, until I find it" (Luke 15:4).

I believe that God, in Christ, has gone to hell and back for you and me and for the world. That doesn't mean that I have the answer to the problem of suffering. Some people suffer much more than others. Innocent children are beaten by adults and many starve. I wouldn't know how to explain the meaning of suffering to the loved ones of those 500 civilians who died in the fiery inferno of that bombed out bunker in Baghdad, or to the loved ones of the allied soldiers who've died. But I believe that God was there... the

*D.T. Niles
"The Signature
of Love"*

Smedes

Spirit of Christ was there... going through the hell those people went through... that Christ's body lies broken and bleeding on the battlefields.

There's a chance that you may find yourself going through hell one day... feeling as though what you've done can never be forgiven... feeling imprisoned, hopeless, alone... everything gone wrong. If you do, or when you do, you may discover that God, in Christ, is there with you... waiting for you.

This morning I'll take bread and break it. I'll take wine and pour it. And you'll hear the Crucified and Risen Lord say, through me, his minister, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you." Once, long ago, my body was broken for all... once my blood was shed for all. On the cross I suffered for you. I felt dreadful thirst. I went through deep darkness and felt God forsaken. But today, throughout the world, my body is still being broken... my blood is being shed once more for you, to bring you to God.

Let us pray: O merciful Father, who in compassion for Thy sinful children didst send Thy Son Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of the world: Grant us grace to feel and to lament our share in the evil which made it needful for Him to suffer and to die for our salvation. Help us by self-denial, prayer, and meditation to prepare our hearts for deeper penitence and a better life. And give us a true longing to be free from sin, through the deliverance wrought by Jesus Christ our only Redeemer. Amen.