

Luke 12:1-7

Fear of Hell

Our series throughout Lent have been sermon that consider the times Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." And each one of the sermon titles has been about the fear of something or other. This week it is the *Fear of Hell*. Now I really considered whether or not I should delve into this topic on the fear of hell. My overactive imagination went into overdrive of images from movies and images I have conjured up in my own mind when thinking about novels I have read. And there are so many directions one could take this conversation. Not only that, the images and understanding of hell that you have could be starkly different from my own.

Now I am no expert on the history around cultural conceptions of hell and I am not sure I need to be. I do know that different names have been used to talk about hell from the Jewish Sheol, which hints at some afterlife, but is about the grave, to the Greek Hades, and thoughts about what is called Gehenna. The first part of a 14th century epic poem called *Dante's Inferno* has also infused our collective imagination about hell without most of us really knowing that is where many of our images about hell have come out of and stuck over centuries.

In the scripture reading for today Jesus is speaking to his disciples, but we are told that there was gathered a crowd of thousands. And Jesus starts in talking about hypocrisy, particularly religious hypocrisy, but the warning for all is that secrets don't stay secret, saying, "whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops." When I was a young girl there was such a thing called party lines. Now this was not where you went to have a good time! These were shared phone lines and your neighbour could listen in your conversations or you could listen in on their conversations. It was not easy to keep secrets under those circumstances, should you choose to share gossip or private information.

Still today there is even more reason to heed Jesus' warning as he says, "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. With the prolific use of cell phones, texting and the ability to share photos along with the use of social media, no one is immune to the dangers of secrets being exposed, and if not secret, just personal moments.

I know many families who never put pictures of their children up on Facebook or Instagram and if they do, they never disclose their names for fear of the harm that could come out of doing so. It is so easy to "proclaim" things from figurative housetops because of our connectivity around the globe.

This is in part how cancel culture has come to be a significant concern for celebrities, politicians, or anyone in the public eye. It can feel as if there is no safe space. Even the use of drones has made some people's backyards and homes places to target.

It is out of this conversation about hypocrisy and secrets or things whispered behind closed doors that Jesus talks about fear saying it is not those who can actually harm your physical body that one need fear but rather to fear God who has the power to cast one into hell. Jesus emphasizes not the hell part but says, "I tell you, fear the one who has the power to cast you into hell." Now these are difficult words to hear coming from Jesus. We often have the gentle Jesus meek and mild image in our heads or the suffering Jesus in our minds rather than the one recalling the one who turned over tables at the temple or this one that talks about hell.

Couple these words with the images we have of hell and we can understand how a few decades ago the practice of preaching fire and brimstone sermons. It was as if our sinfulness was center stage and we better get our act together if we planned on getting into heaven and not go down to the fiery depths.

And many of us have a tendency to think that we are not worthy of God's love. Maybe it is because we know what hell on earth is. It may be abuse, it may be we have been victims of crime, have seen the devastation of war, famine, or refugee camps. It may be that our homes feel like war zones, or that we have gone through or are living through and with addiction or mental illness.

I think that sometimes it is hell on earth that makes us more fearful than any kind of hell that people come up with to scare us in a movie or thriller book.

What seems to be missed are the words that follow all Jesus' talk of being exposed, death, and hell. It is so easy to miss. Jesus goes from this stark and accusatory statement to speaking about sparrows. Birds that come a dime a dozen. Not stunningly beautiful, just ordinary and Jesus says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?" In other words, they are almost worthless, "Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight." Hear that again, though seemingly worthless not one of these little birds is forgotten in God's sight. They have that much value to the Creator.

Jesus goes on to say, "even the hairs of your head are all counted." That is how much value we have to God. God has the power to do what God wills, but God's will is to value us. God's desire is for good not for harm. And then the statement that confirms that as Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Missionary Oswald Chambers said:

It is the most natural thing in the world to be scared, and the clearest evidence that God's grace is at work in our hearts is when we do not get into panics. The

remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.¹

Fearing God is not about being afraid, but rather to have holy awe. To know that God is powerful but chooses love over and above all else. Jesus was the human expression of God's love for us, but even before that we were made to be image bearers of God. God's divine spark is in us. We need not fear anything not even hell itself because God's love for us is so deep, so broad, so high, and so wide.

We need not be afraid of hell. We need not be afraid of God. And though in our humanness we experience fear we need not be afraid for we are valuable in God sight, proven in the love of God displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Bring your fear what ever it is to God and experience the love, grace, and hope that is promised to and for you in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

¹ [Oswald Chambers on Fear | Preaching Today](#). Accessed March 13, 2024.