

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HELL?

(a sermon on an unpopular subject)

Good Morning. It's a beautiful day, isn't it? Here we are in this beautiful city, in this beautiful church, and uh oh, now it's coming. Some of you, when you saw the topic of my sermon in the newsletter this week, asked me, "Reverend, are you really going to talk about hell?"

Why on earth would we spoil a beautiful morning talking about such an unpleasant topic? Most of us think of ourselves as relatively good folk. Maybe we cheat a little on our taxes, but no one here is a cat torturer or an ax murderer—at least not as far as I know! So we figure we're safe. If there were a hell, it wouldn't affect anyone WE know and love. So it's understandable you don't hear much about hell in churches these days—at least not in the nice, respectable, mainstream liberal churches you and I attend. Better to leave that sort of thing to the Southern Baptists.

I'm guessing some of you would rather not talk about hell because you were traumatized by the idea as children—told you'd go there if you lied or disobeyed your mother or played with yourself, right? I know I was. I was told by a Sunday school teacher, bless her heart, that if you didn't accept Jesus as your savior, you'd go to hell—shoot straight down into eternal flames like in *Shoots and Ladders*! That was the damnation sentence the Wilton Manors Presbyterian Church placed on my favorite relatives--- my daddy, and my gram and pop—all Jewish—all burning in hell. What kind of thing is that to tell an eight year old, I ask you?

Yeah, hell is a pretty unappealing subject. All that fire and brimstone makes us damned—and I do mean damned- nervous. We believe in a loving God. How do you justify a God of love condemning her own children to eternal damnation? That's a very disturbing idea. It creates big theological problems, not to mention personal discomfort. So it's an unpopular subject on Sunday mornings these days, especially if you want good attendance.

But we only have to go back as far as the 1930's to see a different homiletical landscape. That was when Aimee Semple McPherson, the great American evangelist who founded America's first mega-church, preached her, shall we say, fiery, sermons. In one of her most famous sermons, Aimee, always the consummate show-woman, walked a tightrope across the sanctuary of the Angeles Temple, to demonstrate the narrow path one must walk to avoid the flickering flames of hell. It was, pardon my expression, one hell of a sermon. Aimee always had a full house. Never mind that she had plenty of temptations of her own, with charges of creaming money off the collection plate to buy her fur coats, and running off with a married man, even while founding the first soup kitchen in Los Angeles during the Great Depression...but that's another story. One thing's for sure: Aimee believed in hell and suffered plenty over it. So did her followers.

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And back in the eighteenth century in the days of preachers like Jonathan Edwards, the great American prophetic forefather, there was plenty of hell talk. That was a long time ago, though, not so far from the days of witch burnings. But you and I... we're more enlightened, aren't we? Why should we think about hell in the twenty-first century? And, if we should think about it, what should we think?

I don't know about you, but I personally can't believe in a god who would send people to hell. Period. That's why I left the Protestant church, as a kid. If I could believe in such a God, I sure as *hell* (ahem) wouldn't worship him. I wouldn't even invite someone that mean to dinner. So what are we to do with this teaching? Simply dismiss it? Why should we care about hell?

You know, if I had preached this sermon a couple of years ago, I might have said "the hell with it. We shouldn't care. It's an arcane holdover from the Middle Ages, destined for the dustbin of bad theology." Probably I wouldn't have even preached this sermon. But one night last fall I went to hell and back, and it changed my mind.

It happened in Mendocino on a weekend retreat with a well-known Peruvian shaman, a medicine man who works with traditional plant medicines to facilitate travel into other dimensions. Juan, as I shall call him, was the genuine article, a third-generation medicine man from the jungles, with a European education in transpersonal psychology as an added bonus. I'd been waiting for years for the opportunity to experience this with a guide I trusted, and I finally found him. I'd been preparing for this journey for a month, praying, cleansing and semi-fasting.

Each evening Juan gave a lecture to our small group through a translator, in which he imparted his native cosmology and the spiritual truths derived from it. His teachings very much resembled the revelations of Emanuel Swedenborg, the mystic whose writings founded this church, although cloaked in different cultural images and symbols. Anyway, that night Juan had spoken about the different levels of the shamanic world: the Upper World, the Lower World, and the Middle World. The Lower World was the world of nature and animal spirits. The Upper World was the world of heavens and celestial teachers. The middle world is the world we mostly live in, and it can contain heaven or hell.

After the lecture, we were invited to partake of the South American herbal sacrament, ayahuasca. As I stepped forward to accept it, I uttered the prayer, "Great Spirit, Grandmother, please guide me. Help me to remove all barriers to love. I wish to BE love."

I drank and lay down on my bed. I put on my blindfold and waited for my inner vision to unfold. I hoped I'd be taken up in flight by heron, or be bathed in love. It didn't take long. Soon I was traveling down labyrinthine pathways to a grotesque underworld. I found myself in a little girl's hell, where people I loved and trusted performed unspeakable acts.

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After all the therapy I had been through, could I be having repressed memories? Was it possible that my father, and also my mother and beloved grandparents, performed sexual acts on my child's body? I tried to face it. I tried to shut it out. I tried everything I knew. While I could imagine that I had occluded a memory of one such incident, these visions involving all my relations simply couldn't be true. What should I believe? The hells were pulling on me. For two nights I lay writhing and retching. Finally in despair, I cried out. "Grandmother," I cried. "Please pour your love down on me." Nothing changed. The scenes repeated. I was in hell and I couldn't get out." Where is the love?" I pleaded.

"Oh," came the answer. "I thought you wanted to BE love."

I had been passively waiting for God to rescue me. But I had it in my power to choose love at any moment. It was there, available all along, like Dorothy with her ruby slippers in Wizard of Oz. It was up to me. I had been turned toward the darkness of hell rather than toward God. I reversed position. I was no longer the victim. I was the person free to choose love or hate, fear and bitterness or goodness. I chose. "I choose love," I called into the hallways of hell. "Whatever happened, I forgive it. I choose love." My body, which had been contracted into a ball, opened. Hell receded. I was free. I emerged and I brought the little girl out with me into the light.

We are free. God does not condemn us to heaven or hell. We're free to choose for ourselves where we will be, based on our loves. We always choose our loves. That night I chose to get out of hell. A part of me that had been in there for who knows how long was liberated.

It's not God who condemns us to hell, but we ourselves. Everything we do, everything we think, and most of all, everything we love, places us in heaven or hell... and I don't mean sometime in the future. I mean RIGHT NOW. We're in heaven or hell right now, depending on the openness we have to God's saving love and mercy. That's right. We need to be saved, not from original sin, but from our own love of sin: the inertia that keeps us entrenched in old habits that no longer serve us, our closed hearts, our fear, our old ways of being that don't make room for God's miracles, our blindness to others' suffering, our apathy. Most of all, we need to be saved from the selfishness and greed that are putting the world in hell, polluting our air and killing children to make more money for the oil companies and so that we can drive the big cars we love. Heaven and hell are not entirely individual matters.

If you don't believe me, listen To Matthew Chapter 25:40-46

'... 'Truly, I say to you, *as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*'⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'⁴⁴ **Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?'**⁴⁵ **Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'**⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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At least for so long as we're on earth, we're in this lifeboat together. Whatever we do to one, we do also to the Lord. And whatever we do to the Lord, we do to everyone. We're all connected.

If self-serving attitudes are what take us to hell, we're in grave danger as a nation. Just as heaven and hell are not solely individual, neither is sin. There are social sins: Idolatry. Consumerism. Putting our love of individual comfort ahead of loving our neighbors, and ahead of God's laws and will—all these cut us collectively off from God. As a society, they send us straight to hell. If you don't believe me, look around you. Is hell not visible in the deadness of the people you see mindlessly gorging on fast food, shooting drugs, viewing Internet pornography or reality TV, compulsively buying more stuff at the mall? Are they not following their loves? Are they not in hell in as a result? Is hell not in the way we treat animals in slaughterhouses and chicken farms, in the automatic weapons anyone can now buy? In the land mines that our country refuses to sign a treaty against? In the child labor we support when we buy cheap goods without thinking? What about a war with no end in sight? We are the victims of our own social evil, and it is taking us, through our love of domination and greed, to hell.

We have abandoned God and God's laws as surely as the Israelites did in the days of the prophets, and we are heading straight for hell as a nation. If you don't believe me, drive through the ghetto. Take a cruise through South Central LA, or the Tenderloin. You'll see the same bombed-out looking buildings and people living in the same degraded huts that Swedenborg described in his visions of hell. Check out the new film about Enron, and you'll see the arrogance and hypocrisy he described—and I promise you, none of those people look happy. A society in which there is such a large gap between haves and have-nots can only breed hell: for the haves, because their greed never satisfies. It only breeds fear of losing what they have; for the have-nots because they are often desperate and hopeless.

It's insane. The way we're doing it is not making anyone happy. Why are we choosing hell instead of heaven as a nation? We have it in our power to choose either. We could wipe out world hunger for less than 20% of what we've already spent on the war on Iraq. That would be a great start toward heaven. So why do we, of our own free will, choose to live in hell instead?

I've been trying to figure that one out for years. I've been a life coach and a counselor for 20 years, so I've had lots of opportunities to observe how it works with individuals. Here's what I can tell you: No one WANTS to choose hell. Everyone wants love, joy, and self-expression. No one starts out saying "I think I'll choose to turn away from God's love and wisdom and be miserable." Rather, life turns that way because of events in our life and how we respond to them. We shut off our love and openness, and our sense of the possibility of transformation, until we just find ourselves in hell. And then what happens is: We think that's the way it is—the way the world it—and the way we are. Of course, if we believe that, we're stuck.

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I had a woman in my office last week who was obviously in hell—drugs, alcohol, out of work, homeless, lost her kids, you name it—in spite of having come from a middle-class, educated family. I asked her why she thought her life was so bad, and she told me her mother had hated her and should burn in hell. I agreed amicably that she probably was doing just that, but then I pointed out that so was the woman sitting across from me. Now this woman didn't want to feel the way she felt, I can assure you. But, in her mind, that's just the way it was, and is. And the way she was, and is, and the way life was, and is.

I asked her what she thought of life and she replied "Life sucks." I asked if she had a spiritual life, and, not surprisingly, she told me no, she didn't believe in any of that. So she turned away from the one source of love and transformation that could have helped her. Why? Why wouldn't someone in that situation do ANYTHING to change it? Why wouldn't she try a twelve-step group, a rehab program, hypnosis, church, voodoo, something? I mean, what has she got to lose? One of the few actual rules I have in my life—some of you have heard me say this before—is IF WHAT YOU'RE DOING ISN'T WORKING, TRY *ANYTHING* ELSE." Clearly what this woman was doing wasn't working. So why wasn't she trying anything else?

Before you judge her, ask yourself: Do you think you would? Try something else? You'd change? Think again. Statistics show that even faced with a life or death choice, most people will not change. If you study people who have had coronary-artery bypass grafting two years after the surgery, you'll find a measly ten percent have made the necessary lifestyle changes to avoid a second surgery—or death. So *even death is not enough to get most of us to change.*

Why not? Why is change so hard? What do we have to lose? Well, I can tell you what that woman had to lose—it was, in an odd way, her sense of control. Her hellish freedom. Her life may have been out of control by my standards, but for her, it was familiar. She was doing it HER WAY. That is what is meant by hellish freedom. She was satisfying her appetites for drugs, junk food, and sex with abusive men. She was in control, even if she hated the results. It was familiar. She knew how to deal with that world. Hell—and I do mean hell—she'd been dealing with it her whole life! God grants us the choice of heavenly or hellish freedom. She's free to follow here love for alcohol and hatred for her mother, even though that love enslaves her.

Now, if she chose to change, she'd be on unfamiliar territory. She'd have to give up doing it her way and do it someone else's way, some way she didn't already know. She'd be vulnerable. She'd have to humble herself. She'd have to say "Y'know maybe I don't know best. Maybe the way I've been going is wrong." She'd have to repent—turn around and walk the other way. Then she'd have to do it God's way. That's a scary proposition, especially if you don't believe in God. So where do you turn? What or whom do you trust when you step into the void?

That's where we are as a nation. We're on a path that's deadly, but the economy runs on it. We're economically addicted to the oil economy, the defense industry, the prison lobby, the drug industry—all these make us feel comfortable and safe, even though

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they're putting us in hell—just like my client and her vodka. If we truly want to change that, we'll have to admit we were wrong about some things. We'll have to turn around and walk the other way. It's hard to change directions when you're on a path that's comfortable and familiar, even when it's leading to hell. We're Americans—we like to do things OUR WAY. At least that's a familiar hell as opposed to a completely unknown future that we're not in control of---even one that just might be heaven.

In twenty years of practice, I've learned that two things must be present for someone to choose to change. The first is that where they are, or what they see ahead, has to be more painful than fear of the unknown or the discomfort of change. But it's not enough to want to move away from something you don't want. You have to also move TOWARD something you do want, to change. That takes faith.

If you're miserable, like this woman was, but you have no idea of something better ... in other words if you have no faith...you're not going there. Who's going to step out into thin air without a hand? It's faith that gets us across the chasm to the other side, when we step off familiar ground.

So, what we need as a nation to get us to change direction and priorities, which we desperately need to do, if we are to survive, is faith. Now, hold on, I don't mean what people who preach hatred in Jesus' name are currently touting as faith, which is just blind belief in what they want to believe. I mean REAL faith—not being able to selectively quote the Bible, while judging and excluding people different from you. We don't all have to have the same creed, go to the same church, follow the same book, or believe the same things. That's not faith, that's lemmings. I mean the kind of faith that allows you to step out into nothing and create something that's never been created before, because you trust God to lead you through the desert of change, just like in the story of the Exodus—to a New Jerusalem, the Promised Land for all people instead of just a few. That takes REAL FAITH—in God, in ourselves as God's servants, and in our ability to call our leaders forth to get us on the right path.

Changing direction requires that we put ourselves in God's hands and do it God's way. That's real freedom, Spiritual Freedom, where we let go control and let God take over. And if God takes over, there's only one place we *can* go, because God loves us, and wants our happiness. So God will *always and only* take us to heaven. That's why choosing the Lord, choosing to turn toward Love and Truth, using reason and intention to serve the good, is called heavenly freedom.

It's up to us. God is calling us to justice. We know what to do. We know what God requires. The prophet Micah said, "He has showed you, oh man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"(Micah 6:8)

God's greatest gift to human beings is freedom: the will and capacity to choose how and who we will be, and to act on our environment. We can use that freedom to bring the gifts of heaven to earth---or not. It is our choice. As a nation we can choose heavenly or

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hellish freedom. We can choose to serve our self-love and greed, our addictions, or we can choose to feed the hungry and clothe the naked because we are doing it FOR THE LORD.

The gift of freedom has strings attached. It comes with an obligation to USE it. Love and wisdom come together through use, we are taught. That is what we are for: to choose to be of use, to choose to do God's work on earth. We can use our freedom to do it our way, and create hell on earth, or we can use our freedom to place more goodness and truth in the world, in the form of freedom and mercy for all. In the words of the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:24) In this way we expand the ranks of heaven.

This action in service of God's commandments and love of our neighbor—or the lack of it—is what brings us to the gates of heaven or hell... and brings heaven or hell to us! We can love our neighbors, and be in heaven, for everyone on this earth is our neighbor, or we can be in hell from the shutting of our own hearts, and live in the sort of world that creates.

It isn't enough to do good in our private lives. If we want to live in heaven, we must also do good in our public lives, as citizens. In ancient Greek, the word "idiot" referred to a private person, someone not involved in serving public life as an active citizen. In *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg said that government as it is in heaven is the government of mutual love, called justice, and focused first on the public good, and then on the good of each individual. Each individual receives benefit in proportion to his or her love of the whole. Those who govern do not control and command; they minister and serve. They put the welfare of the community and their neighbor first, before their own. He further spoke of our responsibilities at three levels: civic, moral, and spiritual. Civic responsibility emanated, in his mind, from the central spiritual, level, as a manifestation of God's love and wisdom. He took a path of social action and responsibility as a citizen. If we take his example to heart, we too will be active citizens, putting our love of the whole before the parts, or our individual comforts. It is by our actions that we turn heavenward.

What would it be like to take the doctrine of use seriously in creating God's kin-dom on earth?

We stand on a precipice between heaven and hell. In our journey from the garden, we have mastered the arts of food cultivation and war, creation and destruction. On our growing edge lie the wondrous and terrible arts of planetary annihilation, cloning, space travel, off-world terraforming, global communications, self-mastery, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, cyberspace, reproductive control, and mind boggling discoveries about the nature and origins of life. We have, as the snake predicted when we ate of the Tree of Knowledge, become as gods, knowing good from evil. And knowing both, with the power of gods, we must choose heaven or hell: whether we will continue to use our power merely to further our own immediate ends as individuals, as a nation, and as a species, or whether we will collectively align our path with the highest

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good for life as a whole, opening the way for the further regeneration of life and consciousness. These are the ethical implications of our faith.

There are those who are choosing apocalypse. Armageddon. Hell on earth. We can create that easily from making life choices in a self-centered bubble, without consideration for our relationship with other nations, our neighbors, or the whole. We can go there simply by consuming more, thinking only of ourselves and those close to us, blaming others for our problems, thinking social responsibility is someone else's job, driving bigger and bigger cars, not voting, not holding our elected leaders accountable, neglecting education and childcare, limiting birth control, using antibiotics promiscuously, allowing corporations free reign, raising and buying genetically modified foods whose seed stocks infect the gene pool, spraying crops with poison, letting our topsoil erode, devoting more miles of earth to mounting collections of garbage and toxic waste, allowing our techno-excrement to seep into groundwater and oceans, drilling everywhere for more oil, ignoring oceanic warming and shrinking fish populations until too late, snubbing our national nose at international treaties, closing our eyes to poverty, disease, and homelessness, and ignoring the cries of our own bodies and souls. It's so easy! At every moment we have the option of choosing hellish freedom, serving all the appetites, which never satisfy. We can turn away from repentance and regeneration.

There is another road. It leads to a world where everyone is fed, clothed, and given the education and resources they need to become self-sufficient. "...As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Just for a moment imagine with me: Armies move and distribute supplies, as the definition of national security expands to include eradicating the poverty and ignorance that breed war. Terrorism declines as good will and helping hands shrink the resentment, frustration, and hatred that previously fed it, and as surgical police action replaces military action in the apprehension of perpetrators. The United States has rejoined the world community and is leading the world in environmental technologies and citizen diplomacy. We are no longer dependent on oil; we are transitioning to a hydrogen economy, which is helping to restore air quality and reduce respiratory diseases and cancers. Corporations have no further economic incentive to pollute, as internationally enforced laws tax environmental impact. We are restoring the soil with new methods of bio-intensive farming and crop rotation, using natural methods for pest control. Grassroots efforts and initiatives have made GMO farming illegal in much of the world, and family farms are thriving.

Congress is putting money into foreign aid and sustainable development, calculating that every dollar spent in aid saves hundreds or thousands spent on defense. This is creating enough surpluses to fully fund drug treatment centers, innovative education, and mother and infant programs at all levels, which, in turn, are causing a significant drop in the prison population. Women are taking their lives into their hands and occupying close to fifty percent of elected offices. Birth control and micro-loans for women in the developing world are giving them the option of having fewer children; those born are healthier and better cared for. Worldwide there is a leveling, and, in some places, a drop

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in the birth rate, as people are educated through major media campaigns to view parenting as a choice and a calling, rather than a right. Funds are going to plant large greenways, in order to reduce greenhouse gases and lower ocean temperature before the fish population is destroyed. The rainforest is receiving UN protection, with forces deployed to prevent clear-cutting, while indigenous peoples are financed for sustainable development. The international economy is in recovery, as global cooperation becomes the defining ethos. Space exploration is taking huge leaps, as the FAA opens it to entrepreneurs and visionaries, and international ventures are seeding research for off-planet experiments. The affluent and middle class are spending more money on travel, volunteering, charity, and developing their inner, spiritual life, realizing that happiness comes from inside and from deeper relationships. Seventy-five percent of the eligible population votes.

Impossible? Not at all. No more than the exodus was impossible. Freedom is always with us. God is always ready to meet us in our desire to regenerate. We can use our freedom as citizens of our great country and of God's Kin-dom, to choose heaven. We can rest in our faith to steer our ship toward truth and goodness, toward justice and sharing. If we have faith enough, we have freedom enough. We can choose to BE love.

We can turn around and choose the good, the life affirming. We can create heaven or hell, in this moment. As we work to create heaven in the world, we are creating it for ourselves, by our actions of love and wisdom. We grow our soul and serve God through serving our world. Our spiritual regeneration is not taking place in a vacuum. It is linked to our actions for the good and the true IN THIS WORLD. Heaven is created right here.

You and I are the vessels and instruments of God. We receive God's love and guidance through divine influx. We manifest it through our uses, our works, and our charity. We are God's hands on earth, which is, after all, heaven's nursery. So why should we care about hell? Well, because if we're not careful, we'll wind up there. Some of us are already there. But if we choose—with our great gift, freedom, we can reside, through our actions and our love of neighbor and God, through justice and charity, in heaven—beginning right now.