

Pentecost 16, September 25, 2022

(Lk 16:19-31; Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Ps 146; I Tim 6:6-19)

Once upon a time there was a beautiful city. It sat atop a single mountain in the middle of a plain, and could be seen from far off.

Like all cities in that region in those days, it was surrounded by a thick, high wall—eight strong men could walk abreast atop the wall. Any enemy approaching would think twice about trying to wage war on that city.

Not far to the east of the mountain was a smaller hill. The dirt road to the top wound past a large grove of olive trees. The trees growing there were offshoots of trees of a bygone time, for olive trees reproduce from their roots. From that olive garden one could see the fortified city on top of the mountain.

Just to the south of the mountaintop was a steep drop to a deep valley. For hundreds of years, maybe *thousands*, that valley had been the garbage dump of the city. Once the garbage was thrown down into the valley, it was consumed by fire. The many people in the city created much garbage, so the fires never went out.

The city on the mountaintop is Jerusalem. The hill to the east is the Mount of Olives, and the grove of trees is the Garden of Gethsemane. The valley of fire is the Hinnom Valley, called in the Bible *Gehenna*.

The valley was a notorious place in Old Testament history. For hundreds of years, maybe thousands, there many first-born sons had been sacrificed in worship to the pagan deity Molech. The pagans, and even some Jews who lived in the region, believed if they honored Molech that way, he would bless them. – Do you remember that God commanded Abraham, back in Genesis, to sacrifice his only son Isaac whom he loved?

The word *Gehenna* in the New Testament is used almost exclusively by Jesus. Everyone who heard his teaching knew he was referring to the garbage dump in the valley south of Jerusalem. That reference would have been as clear to them as Lambeau Field is to us. It was a place everyone knew of.

Jesus was a master teacher. He told stories and spoke in parables, inviting his listeners to enter into the situations he created. He used ideas and examples from every-day life.

But not every word was meant to be taken literally. Jesus taught in the context of life in the Holy Land 2000 years ago so the people could understand his message. Our context today is totally foreign to that way of life, so it's important—*very* important!—that we recognize how different the contexts are.

Fast forward 1300 years from the time of Jesus. Most people who lived in what's now Europe were Christians. From Rome the Catholic Church pretty much ruled their lives.

Only the highly educated—usually priests and lawyers—knew how to read, and the mass was celebrated in Latin, so church doctrine was taught by art. Icons, carvings, etchings, paintings small and large—this is how the Medieval Christian learned the stories and messages of the Bible.

In the fourteenth century, the Italian author Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, depicting how he viewed the afterlife. The first book was called *The Inferno*; the second was *Purgatorio*; then came *Paradiso*.

Around the same time artists began painting the same ideas. What would it look like to be in heaven, or in purgatory, a Roman Catholic teaching? How could art portray *hell* so as to make Christians want to avoid it?

Are you wondering where I'm going with this? My point is, most Christians today picture *hell* as did the medieval artists: a place filled with demons and devils and unquenchable fire.

For hundreds of years the Roman Catholic Church and many other Christian denominations tried to “scare people out of hell.” If your earthly life wasn't good enough in God's eyes, you'd “go to hell” when you died. And “hell” always looked like what Michaelangelo and other well-known artists had painted.

Hell looked like a flaming pit where sinners writhed in torment, while demons and devils tortured them. That image of eternal suffering after death is imprinted on the minds of Western Christians as a biblical truth.

But it's *not* a biblical truth. Jesus used the word *Gehenna* eleven times in his teaching—and each and every time he was referring to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. He *wasn't* talking about a place of eternal suffering after death.

In biblical times, pagans and most Jews believed that death was the end. When you died your body decayed and your soul went to the place of the dead. For the Hebrews in the Old Testament that was *Sheol*; the Greek equivalent in the New Testament is *Hades*. And everyone believed that God was not in that place (though now we know that God is everywhere).

To be cut off from God, separated from the comfort of God's presence, would torment the *living* soul. That would fit the description of the rich man in today's gospel: **I am in agony in these flames.**

Some of you may think my theology is pretty far out, but clergy and theologians today are about equally split in this understanding of the Bible. Even many Roman Catholic writers have given up the idea of burning in hell eternally after death. We're thankful to Martin Luther, who showed us the loving, merciful nature of God—so instead of trying to “scare people out of hell,” the church today seeks to “attract people into God's eternal kingdom”—that is, heaven.

I'm NOT saying there's no need to obey God, to walk in his ways and follow his commandments. I AM saying, however, that how we live in this life may not determine eternal damnation or suffering.

The rich man in the gospel begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus across the chasm between heaven and Hades. But we have no need of such a messenger. We have Moses and the prophets—*and we have Jesus*, sent by God to be the bridge across the chasm that separated humankind from God for all eternity.

That bridge is for all to cross. No money can buy you a ticket, and no poverty can keep you out. If you walk blindly in this life, you miss the blessings of God. But all it takes is a moment of repentance, and all heaven is open to you for now and for eternity.

Thanks be to God.