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“Liberation”

I Peter 3: 18–22, Mark 16: 1–8

September 23, 2018

Main Street UMC

I invite you to open up your hymnal to page 881; this is the creed we normally say. Today we used 882. The editors of the hymnal identified 881 as the Traditional Version and 882 as the Ecumenical Version. We will learn in a few minutes why that is ironic.

At a previous church, I used 882 for several Sundays in a row and after service one Sunday, an elderly gentleman who I dearly love said to me, “I like the old creed better.” What he was referring to is the one that the hymnal refers to as the Traditional Creed. I absolutely delighted in his comment because it is identical to what I said more than three decades ago when I first attended a Methodist Church. They had said the same version of the creed that we normally do (881) and I came out of Church saying, “I like the old creed better.” The ancient creed is 882 and has the line, “he descended into hell” or if you prefer, “he descended to the dead.”

A friend of mine who is a Methodist lives in High Point but goes home almost every weekend to help her elderly mother. She attends Wednesday night activities regularly at First Presbyterian Church in High Point. One weekend, maybe it was because of the weather, she couldn’t head back to her hometown, thus she went to worship on Sunday at First Pres., and someone came up to her after the service and asked, “So, did you descend into hell with us today?”

Most theologians contend that the creed is not referencing “Gehenna” that place of eternal judgment, but Hades, Sheol, the place of the dead.

People from other traditions have asked me, “How come the Methodists delete a line from the Apostle’s Creed? Isn’t that kind of nervy of them? I mean, orthodox Christianity for ages has been saying, Christ descended to the dead. What’s up with those Methodists who think that they can edit the Apostle’s Creed?”

Taylor Burton Edwards, Director of Worship Resources for Discipleship Ministries of the UMC, said that when John Wesley in 1784 first gave the Sunday Service book to the American Church, Wesley included in the Apostles’ Creed the line “he descended into hell”. In 1786, when the second edition came out, an interesting change occurred; “he descended into hell” was left in the creedal form, but was deleted from the baptismal questions. Why did that happen? We really don’t know. In 1792, the year after Wesley died, a new service book came out for the American Methodist Episcopal Church, and it deleted the creed altogether. The

Apostles' Creed was not put back in until 1905 and when it was finally included it did not have the phrase "he descended into hell or he descended to the dead."

When the editorial team decided to put the Apostles' Creed back in the service book, why did they not include the line "he descended into hell"? Perhaps they had been influenced by liberal theology's disdain of the concept of hell. Hell is not a topic for polite conversation in some circles. Maybe it was a reaction by the editors against Methodism's frontier revivalism where some preachers were way too interested in hell; threatening people with it if they were playing cards, dancing, or having a smoke with a buddy. I really don't why the editors made that decision.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was a great hope that technology and science would solve all human problems, eradicate hunger, scarcity, disease, and war. The brutality and the insanity of the wars of the 20th century have firmly buried that false hope. Living in a post-Dachau, a post-Auschwitz world, it is difficult to believe in any human constructed utopias. Living in a world plagued by terrorism: Las Vegas, London, Manchester, New York, Paris, Stockholm, and too many other cities to name, living in such a broken world reinforces the New Testament acknowledgement of evil and its belief of judgment and accountability. In this world, there is radical evil. The New Testament is no stranger to it. The New Testament almost begins with a massacre of innocents and, if it weren't for God's saying yes to the world's no, it would have ended with a crucifixion. No wonder that in Revelation 6:10, the martyrs cry out from the altar, "Sovereign Lord, Holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood?" Our world cries out for justice and accountability. The Biblical witness is that God will provide that. God will judge.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of the beggar Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man cries out to Father Abraham and says, "Have Lazarus dip his finger in the water and send him to me?" You see even in hell, he still treats Lazarus as someone beneath him, someone to serve him. He doesn't direct his request of water to low of station Lazarus, but to Father Abraham. Father Abraham responds, "No, in your earthly life you received good things, and poor Lazarus got the short end of the stick. Besides all this, between you and us, a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

But even in the midst of that story, there's good news between the lines. No one can cross that gulf except the Lord of the Resurrection. No one can cross that gulf except for Jesus. The Apostles' Creed and I Peter 3: 18 teaches us that Jesus did just that. Christ suffered for our sins, was put to death, and while Pilate and the High Priests thought the story was over with, Jesus was busy. Jesus was busy preaching to the spirits in prison. Christ kicked the doors of Hades open, knocked

down the gates of Sheol, and proclaimed a message of liberation for those who wanted to hear.

In the early Church, there was a story about Christ's proclamation to those in Hades. While preaching to those in prison, Christ goes over to Adam. Adam cries out, "My God, my God, I'm not worthy. It was by me that sin came into the world. Go away from me." Jesus grabs a hold of Adam and says, "Arise and come with me. Let us leave this place and you who formerly lived in an earthly paradise will now live in a heavenly one."

What this teaches us is even Hades does not have the final word. Even hell, cannot keep us away from God's love, from God's liberation, from God's transforming grace. J. Warren Smith of Duke Divinity School said that descending into hell means that "there is no part of human existence which Christ did not descend." And what a comfort that is. You know some of us this morning may be feeling that we're trapped in our own version of hell. But there is no prison that we've constructed that can withstand Christ liberating love.

Like the stone table cracking in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, death is undone by the Lord of the Resurrection. As St. Paul wrote, "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."