

Psalm 66:8-20
1 Peter 3:13-22

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 7, 2017

The Descensus Clause

Introduction to the Psalm

Following the lectionary today, our Psalm today brings us to worship, where the faithfulness of God is remembered, where offerings are made, and where one worshipper offers testimony to all who will listen. Hear these words from Psalm 66:8-20 . . .

Introduction to the Epistle

The first five verses of our Epistle today address the matter of suffering, in particular the matter of suffering for doing good. The recipients of the letter were outsiders in the Roman Empire and subject to social sanctions and perhaps even to violence. But here, they can receive an encouraging word. A couple of verses form the basis for part of our Apostles' Creed that some find confusing, even troubling. Listen to these words from 1 Peter 3:13-22 . . .

Sermon

The Apostles' Creed that has been adopted by our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and included in the Book of Confessions, states of Jesus, "He descended into hell." But this so-called "Descensus Clause" has long been a source of puzzlement and angst among church members. As a result, some churches have in the past, chosen to omit the clause when using the creed in worship.

No doubt, most of you have never heard a sermon on this text from 1 Peter:

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. (3:18b-19)

And surely, many ministers have entered retirement having never preached on this passage. Archibald Hunter, who taught at Aberdeen University in Scotland, says in the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*: “This passage [from 1 Peter] is one of the darkest in the New Testament, and exegetes have differed about the interpretation of every word.”

While this *is* a difficult text, let me try to shed some light on it this morning. After all, while you do not expect your pastor to “have all the answers,” it is right for you to expect him, through prayerful study, to give the best interpretation he can of scripture—any scripture.

We must acknowledge up front that the text for this sermon is tucked away in a prepositional phrase, offered almost parenthetically in a sentence about something else—that something else being the problem of suffering as a result of faith in Christ. Nonetheless, for the aforementioned reasons I think it a text worth exploring.

We will begin by considering the meaning of the word *hell*, as used in the Apostles' Creed. Then we will look at what the Descensus Clause does *not* mean. And finally, we will consider what it *does* mean.

In the New Testament there are two Greek words that have been translated *hell*; these are *Gehenna* and *Hades*. *Gehenna* carried the meaning of hell as it is commonly understood today—a place of eternal judgment of the unrepentant and unbelieving. *Hades*, though, did not mean the place of punishment, but “the place of the dead.”

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *Sheol* carried the same meaning. William Barclay says that the Jews had a very shadowy conception of life beyond the grave. They did not think in terms of heaven and hell, but of a kind of twilight shadowland where there was neither light, nor strength, nor joy. It was a place in the lowest parts of the earth, where existed the souls of all the dead. They neither suffered pain nor enjoyed pleasure. The Psalmist wrote:

For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise? (6:5)

And in Ecclesiastes we read,

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might;
for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol,
to which you are going. (9:10)

Now in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era, perhaps under the influence of Iranian thought, there developed the idea of a separate place of torture for the wicked, and it was called Gehenna. However, by the time of 1 Peter—perhaps written from Rome about 64 A.D.—Hades or Sheol was no longer regarded solely as the place of the dead, but partly as a place of punishment and partly as an intermediate state. Hades is depicted as having a place of torment (resembling Gehenna) in one area and a place of comfort (Abraham’s bosom) in another.

In Acts 2:31 Simon Peter said that Jesus “was not abandoned to Hades.” Also, in Ephesians 4:9 we read that Christ, before he ascended on high, first “had also descended into the lower parts of the earth.” Clearly a reference to a descent into Hades. So it is this understanding of Hades as the place of the departed spirits to which Christ descended; it is this understanding that is meant by the creed’s, “He descended into hell.”

...he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey,
when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah...
(1 Peter 3:19-20a)

Now before we go on to consider how we might best interpret the text from 1 Peter, let us look briefly at one thing the Descension Clause does not mean. It has been widely held that “He descended into hell” refers to the sufferings Christ endured for our sakes in providing for our salvation. The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 44 asks:

Why is there added: “He descended into hell”?

And the answer:

That in my severest tribulation, I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul both on the cross and before.

Surely, all Christians agree that while Jesus was on the cross he endured the most extreme sufferings of both body and soul. This was the sacrifice he endured for us and our salvation. His broken, nail-pierced body, his blood poured out. Also Jesus felt the horrors of pain and separation from the heavenly Father. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46)

However, the Descensus Clause clearly refers to something that happened to Jesus *after* his death, not while he was still on the cross. The Apostles’ Creed traces in chronological order certain facts of the experience of Christ:

[who] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven....”

What then are we to make of all this today? The simplest meaning is that Peter and the writers of the Apostles’ Creed believed that our Lord descended into Hades to preach the gospel to certain imprisoned spirits. If we ask what value this belief has for us today, one answer is that *wherever* men and women are, Christ can save. Even if they have wasted themselves in riotous ways and are far from home, Christ can save. Even if they have committed themselves to little more than building bigger barns and gaining the whole world, Christ can save. Even if their hearts are hardened and they are arrogant, self-centered, and selfish, Christ can save. If the gospel can be proclaimed even to the disobedient dead, is there any life that is beyond God’s grace? What Christ sought in his descension, in that so called “Harrowing of Hell,” was thoroughly consistent with what he sought in his earthly ministry—to seek and save the lost.

And to all who believe, he gives power to become the children of God. He breaks the power of reigning sin. He sets the prisoner free.

While some think these departed “spirits” are fallen angels, 1 Peter appears to think of them as humans, since they are described as those who were disobedient when the Lord was patient during the time of Noah. These wicked people of a wicked age were seen as imprisoned and confined by their own choices. Genesis tells us how God had waited patiently for years and years. Yet Noah’s contemporaries could not or would not discern the signs of the time, repent, and obey. They rejected Noah, God’s man of faith. They ridiculed his ark and refused the means of escape it provided. For Peter, Christ’s descension into hell was a dramatic historical event. But in time it came to reveal the scope and sweep of his dominion over the living and the dead of all ages. Christ in his suffering and death is not taken captive. Indeed, he has taken captivity captive, and made known his triumph not only in our world, but in the world beyond.

While Peter speaks of those who in former times did not obey, the broader implication is for all of us, not just those in Noah’s time, to avoid disobeying God. The call to obedience has existed for many, many years. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, who did not obey God. Today, however, the word “obey” is out of fashion. Some think it is oppressive and insensitive.

The word “obey” in Hebrew means to listen closely, to listen acutely. So, for example, when God tells Adam and Eve to obey, God is not saying, “Do what I tell you, or else.” No, God is saying, “Listen closely to me.” Indeed, the Greek word for obedience carries the same meaning: to listen closely. In our spiritual journey are we growing closer to God, or are we slipping further away from God? What made Jesus unique was that he listened very closely to God, which led him to serve and to love humanity in radical, selfless ways.

So, the author's point is not to threaten. Rather, it is to awaken in us the desire to listen closely to God, to meditate on his Word, to listen in a way that reveals our trust in God. As we do, we will avoid the paths set by those of Noah's day, who did not trust in God. So, let ours be a life of close listening. Let ours be a life of trust, of confidence in God, revealed most clearly in our actions toward others. To live this way is to grow closer to living as Jesus did. To live this way is to grow closer to Jesus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.