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**“Lenten Locations: Hell, Sheol, Hades & the Valley of Hinnom”**

Matt. 10:26-31

According to several sources, this is a true story: Albert Einstein was going on a train to an out-of-town engagement. The conductor stopped by to punch the tickets. The great scientist, who was preoccupied with his work, began to rummage through his coat pockets and briefcase to no avail. He could not find his ticket. The conductor noticed his fumbling and his embarrassment and tried to reassure Dr. Einstein. “We all know who you are; and I’m certain you bought a ticket. Don’t worry about it. Everything is okay.” The conductor proceeded down the aisle punching other tickets. Before he moved on to the next car, he looked back and saw Einstein down on his hands and knees looking under his seat trying to find his ticket. He came back and gently said, “Dr. Einstein, please don’t worry about it. I know who you are.” Einstein looked up and said, “I too know who I am. What I don’t know is where I’m going!” *preachingtoday.com*

Of course, when you are traveling, knowing where you are going is essential. But I’ve noticed that many people in the modern world have a particular fixation about where we will go when we die. Some churches have a definitive answer for that question; what you do to get there; or what you do to avoid going there!

At any rate, what we are embarking on for this season of Lent is Lenten Locations. Each week, we will explore a Biblical place: The Tower of Babel, The Promised Land, Wilderness, and today, Hell. I’m so excited - because, in 40 years of ministry, I’ve never preached a hell-fire and brimstone sermon! And I can just sense the excitement you must be feeling.

I will say, however, that I am approaching these places as theological concepts – not necessarily physical places. I want to explore what the Bible has to say about

these places and put it in historical context. At the same time, I want to talk about what this theological place might have to do with our own lives.

The Bible has several names for the concept of hell. I'll talk about each word briefly and what distinguishes it from the other words.

**Sheol** is the Hebrew word for the place where those who died were congregated. Sheol is deep underneath the earth and it is the point at the greatest possible distance from heaven. On the screen is an outline of the ancient Hebrew understanding of the world. They based this view on what was available to them. It was a flat world with heaven above and earth in the middle and hell below. In the cosmic universe of today, there is no "up" and "down"; rather, there are orbits, rotations, planets, suns and they are all moving. That is one sign that the concept of Sheol - or hell - is theological and conceptual; not geographical or literal.

The next thing about Sheol is that all the dead meet there regardless of rank or condition. The rich and poor, the pious and the wicked, the old and young, the master and slave all abide there at death. I Kings tells us that King David was in Sheol. In Sheol, silence is the norm and God is not praised. Sheol is a place of sleep. Yet, God is Sheol's ruler – not Satan, according to 6 different Biblical texts. And a stream of water flows through Sheol. Does this sound like the Biblical hell we've all heard about? No. Yet, Sheol is translated in our English Bibles as hell. The Jewish Encyclopedia describes Sheol as a family grave on a large scale. It is simply the collective place where bodies are buried.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> word I want to explain is **Hades**. Hades is simply the Greek word equivalent to Sheol in Hebrew. Hades is described as being "in the heart of the earth" and is said to be *below, down or beneath the earth*. In the Bible, Hades is the temporary address of all souls. It is the place for the soul, not the body. Yet, Hades is translated all but one time in the Bible as "hell".

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Biblical place I want to talk about is **Gehenna** – literally the **Valley of the Hinnon**. It was the Jerusalem city dump. Everything from garbage and sewage, to unclaimed bodies were disposed of in this dump. It often smoldered with fire to reduce the stench and the mass.

The only time a “lake of fire” is mentioned in the Bible is in Revelation. It is the final hell and a place of burning sulfur. The Valley of Hinnon is most likely the literal place being described here. Given that the book of Revelation is highly symbolic and metaphorical, it follows that this “lake of fire” is a metaphorical location for those whose lives end up in rubble – not an actual place where someone was tortured for eternity.

All of these are the words translated into English as “hell”.

- Sheol, a place where all souls go; God is there; a river is there.
- Hades, the Greek word for Sheol; a temporary address for all souls
- Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnon, a literal dumping ground outside of Jerusalem.

None of these sound like the more modern version that is preached in churches today. That is because it is a more recent phenomenon and doctrine specific to European and Western culture. **The fiery pit of hell where sinful people will burn for all eternity is not Biblical.**

Shoot. So much for the hell-fire and brimstone sermon. I totally blew my very first try at scaring you into Christian faith.

It was Paul Tillich who pointed out “The doctrine of the unity of everything in divine love and in the Kingdom of God deprives the symbol of hell of its character as ‘eternal damnation.’” In other words, the theology of creation (and God’s blessing of the creation, and the idea that we are all inter-related through creation) stands in direct opposition to the idea that the same God would condemn or destroy part of that creation.

This was such a hot topic that F.D. Maurice, who was the Chair of Theology at King's College in London in 1853, had to resign because he wrote an essay debunking the doctrine of eternal damnation. This was Victorian England, for heaven's sake! Maurice's protest was using moral criteria to evaluate theological beliefs. What God does or does not do should not be based on our personal moral beliefs, Maurice wrote.

So what does this have to do with our lives today? Is this something more than a history and geography lesson?

I think this information gives us some talking points with our peers and it may give each of us a sense of peace when considering our own mortality. So, if you are a note-taker, here are some talking points:

1. There is very little Biblical evidence that Jesus taught or believed in a literal hell. Instead, the Jesus story is about moving from our own hell to new life. The Jesus we know through the Bible sees suffering all around him and repeatedly states "I have compassion for them." This compassion consistently moves Jesus to action, often breaking the norm of his culture to provide comfort. Jesus instructed that we love our enemies. Why would anything less be attributed to God?
2. There is something in our spirits that tells us that torturing people is morally wrong. Does it make sense that our God would be interested in exacting torture? We believe that torture is morally reprehensible. We even have laws against doing it to animals. I find the idea that God would torture people utterly offensive.

However, our mood as Americans is quickly turning violent. Peace-loving Christians are not interested in violence. We can all name people who deserve hell – murderers, people who design regimes of evil and war – so if there is no hell, where is justice for them? We certainly don't want to share heaven with them. That's a whole other sermon – but let me say that heaven & hell are not the only options available to God. That is our limited and dualistic mindset.

3. The Christian faith is based on love and compassion, not on power and terror. We believe because we want to align ourselves with a power greater than our own. We believe because we know that we fall short on compassion and mercy, but we hope that some power greater than our own will be compassionate, forgiving and merciful to all people.
4. Finally, it does not make sense to believe in the blessing of God's creation, the interconnectedness of life, and the wholeness intended by God while promoting the idea that God is willing to destroy this beautiful and blessed work.

Let us build our Lenten map with blessing, wholeness, beauty and compassion. Perhaps there will be no room for hate and violence when the map is complete.

Resources Used:

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