

The Fifth Week of Lent • April 1, 2009
St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA
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Matthew 27:45-48

"The Wound of Abandonment"

We don't talk about hell much anymore. Really, what is hell, anyway? What comes to mind if you think about it right now? Is hell an abstract concept, a real place, or both? If we surveyed popular culture, we might come back with an image of hell as being a place with fire and brimstone, where there are horned, crimson-skinned demons running around with pitchforks to torment the souls of the damned – in short, the version of hell that you can find in old cartoons. All through history, artists, writers, and philosophers have depicted a number of different kinds of hell, some more severe than others: some are hot, some are cold, and some are the epitome of suffering. Back at the beginning of our Lenten midweek series, I referred to Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno*, his guided tour through the very depths of hell. In *The Inferno*, Dante envisions hell as a place far below the surface of the earth which is divided into concentric rings. Each of the rings confines different categories of sinners: the farther in Dante goes, the worse the sins he sees. Though not everyone shares Dante's vision of what hell would be like, I think that most people would agree with him that it would probably be pretty populous – overcrowded, some might joke. But the real, terrible truth about this place of the damned is how very alone its inhabitants are.

Hell is real, and it is horrible. Scripture does point to the suffering that takes place there; however, the primary cause of that suffering does not come in the flames of fire or the stench of brimstone, but in the experiencing of **the absence of God's presence**. The souls in hell are alone, cut off from their Creator. In our society, one of the most severe forms of punishment – and one that is likely to foster a change in behavior – is isolation. You'll see this in play when a child is sent to his room (without television or computer!) or made to sit in the corner, when a teenager has her cell phone taken away, or when a convict is placed into solitary confinement. Human beings were not made to be in isolation. So why would God imprison people in hell? C.S. Lewis had a great insight on this question when he observed that the gates of hell are indeed locked – but from the inside. Our sin is all about us human beings wanting to go off on our own, away from God and His will. As another Lutheran preacher once noted, sin is not about what to do or not to do. **Sin is cutting yourself off from God.** Damnation is, in effect, God saying to the sinner, "Have it your way."

On the cross, Jesus suffered the wound of abandonment. After everything else that had happened to him, after suffering all the wounds of body and spirit with which we, along with the people of Jerusalem, afflicted him, Jesus took on the weight of your sins, of my sins – of every sin – trading his innocence for our guilt. On the cross, he took on all the sin that cried out to God, "Leave me alone! Go away!" And his Father judged him as the ultimate sinner: Jesus was cut off. On the cross, Jesus experienced the full reality of hell.

Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This was not a cry of disbelief or questioning. Even in his grief and shame, Jesus knew that God was still "My God." He knew why the Father had abandoned him. He knew all along why he had come, what he was sent to do. He knew that, to save us, he would have to take our place. On the cross, Jesus suffered the wound of abandonment so that we would never have to.

Hell is real, but so is heaven. We don't know all that much about it, but it's not the place of clouds and harps that cartoons depict, either. Heaven is the opposite of hell: instead of being cut off, we are welcomed by God, brought fully into His presence to experience the fellowship that Jesus won for us. Rather than being left all alone, we come into the joyous company of all the saints around the throne of the Lamb. And why should this matter to us now? This fellowship with our heavenly Father comes to us even now through faith. **For the Christian, life with God has already begun.**

God loves you, and for the sake of His Son, He will never abandon you.
Amen.