

MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:

CHRISTUS VICTOR

Genesis 6:5-8

I Peter 3:17-20

Ephesians 4:8-10

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 6:5-8

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

I Peter 3:17-20

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. 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, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.

Ephesians 4:8-10

Therefore it is said,

*‘When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.’*

(When it says, ‘He ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

In this series on the crucifixion of Christ, on which I have been preaching intermittently since September, the motif of the last sermon was *Christus Victor: The Victorious Christ*. In that sermon I said that:

The universe is a *battlefield* between the Power of God and the Power of Sin, Evil, Death.

Christ *enters* that battlefield, *loses* his life in the most brutal way possible, but *prevails*.
Through *undergoing* death, Christ *overcomes* the power of Sin, Evil, Death.

*Christus Victor: The Victorious Christ.*²

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

² This was developed by Gustav Aulen and published in *Christus Victor* in 1930.

A joyful extension of that victory lies behind today's ironic motif: "The Descent into Hell."

I.

Like many of you, I grew up saying the Apostles' Creed each Sunday.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...

Then...

he descended into hell...

Somewhere along the way I learned that Methodists omit this phrase from the Creed, and I assumed they were just a bit squeamish about an unpleasant subject – both the idea of "*hell*" and the idea that Christ would deign to be found there.

But it was the "*unpleasantness*" of the phrase that *appealed* to me: The implication that Jesus Christ is *present* to us in our sufferings, our sorrows, our loneliness, our illnesses, our infirmities, our depression, our grief, and in the times we have suffered injustice gave me great comfort. The idea that there *is* a "hell" – whether it be a place, a realm, a metaphor, or a mess of our own making³ – and the even *bolder* idea that Christ is *present* to us in such a place or realm, metaphor or mess, calls to mind two of my most cherished passages of scripture:

*"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me..."*⁴

and

*"...if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there."*⁵

I have never shrunk back from saying: "Christ descended into hell," because it has been a great *comfort* and *strength* to believe that Christ has and will continue to be present in those places to which I have fallen, stumbled, or been cast.

³ These are explained in Rutledge 398-403. Sheol, more common in the Old Testament, refers to the underworld where all the dead dwelt: a shadowy state with no meaningful individual survival. In the New Testament, Gehenna, often linked with Hades and Hell, refers to the consuming fire that would follow the last judgment and is a place to which the judged were consigned. It had a "ruling enemy" – Beelzebub, Satan, Legion. Thus, according to Rutledge, Hell can be a place of shadows (Sheol); a realm of death (Hades); a place of punishment (Gehenna). Each reflects godlessness.

⁴ Psalm 23:4 KJV.

⁵ Psalm 139:8 KJV.

II.

But working on this series, I have discovered an *even more encompassing* meaning to the phrase “he descended into hell” than the *comfort* I had known before.

Fleming Rutledge gives voice to this expansive understanding.⁶ It is not just the *comfort* of Christ’s presence to which the descent bears witness; it is also Christ’s *power* over *all* the forces represented *by* or found flourishing *in* the realm of the dead.

Rutledge points out that as the first act of his resurrected life, Christ descends into hell because God will not allow *any permanent resistance* to his purpose to *survive* in the universe.

- Though she acknowledges that “the *victory* of Christ over hell *cannot be proved* by *current* conditions in the world,” she stands firmly with the proclamation found in I Peter: “Angels, authorities, and powers [are] made subject to him.”⁷
- No matter how often the light of Christ seems extinguished by the worst human beings do, some of which we are seeing today, the grave could not hold him.
- He is indeed *Christus Victor*.

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In light of this lack of evidence, Rutledge says, “the *Christian Life* is the *Advent Life* – *waiting* and *working* and *testifying* in the dark...”

- *We wait* in hope
- *We pray* in hope
- *We act* in hope

And as we wait and pray and act...

- We trust *good* will prevail over evil.
- We trust *justice* will prevail over injustice.
- We trust that “there *is* something *new* under the sun.”⁸

We hold fast to the promise of the opening verse of John: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness *has* not, *cannot*, *will* not, overcome it.”⁹

⁶ The material in this section can be accessed through a summary of her book she provided at Calvary-St. George’s Church in New York City on October 2, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg50KEoiDsU>.

⁷ I Peter 3:22.

⁸ *Contra Ecclesiastes* 1:9.

⁹ John 1:5.

III.

But Christ's descent into hell opens the door to an *even more bold aspect* of his victory over sin, evil, death. The door that cracks open is the implication that *every human being* – no matter how sinister or demonic – *can be so recreated by the victorious Christ as to join the rest of humanity as a member of God's redeemed community*.¹⁰

- Christ's descent into the realm of death can imply that those people past or present who are the *embodiment* of evil are both *destroyed* and *remade* so that they take their place among a spiritual humanity of which they have *never* been a part during their evil days on earth.
- When we say that Christ "descends into hell," our words reflect an *aggressive invasion* on the part of God into the most destructive realms of evil and death, including confronting and overcoming its most *cruel perpetrators*. It is an invasion *commandeered* by the risen and victorious Christ, an invasion whose *outcome* and *purpose* for each person rest sole with Christ.
- Again, it is *Christus Victor*.

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Where do we see Biblical support for openness to redemption of the evil among us?

Hear again what we read from the First Letter of Peter:

*...Christ...suffered for sins once for all,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
in order to bring [the unrighteous] to God.*

Who are the "unrighteous"? It is those...

*who in former times did not obey,
when God waited patiently
in the days of Noah...
[when]the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth,
And...every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts
was only evil continually.*

To be sure, this language is speculative. It is imaginative. It is metaphorical. It comes without eyewitnesses late in the New Testament, unarrayed in scientific proof or historical verification. But the claim it presents is that Christ's descent into hell is for the purpose of bringing those who dwell within that realm or region into the realm and reign of God.

¹⁰ The remaining material is from Rutledge 395-461.

If it is true that Christ descends into hell with the purpose of redeeming *everyone* there, given the *genocides* of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given what we are seeing *today*, given what some of us have experienced *directly* at the hands of others, how do we handle the prospect of redemption being extended to those who are evil?

Christ's descent into hell comes with *one major caveat*.

Whatever release Christ's descent accomplishes, it occurs solely through the *speech* of God. Christ "made a *proclamation* to the spirits in prison," writes Peter.

What is the significance of speech?

This speech is not ordinary conveyance of words. It is speech akin to that uttered by God at *creation*. Just as God created the world from the watery chaos of *tohu wabohu* at creation,¹¹ in his descent into hell, the risen Christ, as God, creates something *entirely new* within the realm of the dead.

When Christ is "making a proclamation to the spirits in prison,"

- He is *not* forgiving the sins of those who are there.
- He is *not* pardoning the evil deeds of evil men and evil women.
- Rather, in the realm of death, Christ is *creating* something entirely new. "Let there be light," said God, "and there was light."¹²

If the demonic manifestations of evil who still roam the earth are indeed the recipients of God's creative proclamation, they are in essence *destroyed* as in the Flood and re-created into something entirely different than what they were. It is creation *after* destruction, just as "in the days of Noah." Creation from nothing. Creation that bears witness to the power of God over *all*, including over evil.

IV.

On a final and less heavy note: for Christ to descend to the realm of the dead and create something new opens the door for the *hope* and *affection* we have for those *good* and *decent* people who have gone *before us* and yet who *never claimed* to have faith.

- Sometimes they are called "anonymous Christians."
- Sometimes they are referred to as "silent saints."
- Sometimes they are called "silent witnesses to the Gospel."

I imagine that in his descent into hell, it would be but a *minor* effort for the risen Christ to say to such a one "Let there be faith" and for the narrator to respond, as in Genesis, "And it was so."

¹¹ Genesis 1:2.

¹² Genesis 1:3.

I'll close with words from a sermon, preached on Easter Sunday six hundred years ago, by John Donne:¹³

The dead hear not thunder,
Nor feel they an earthquake.
If the cannon batter the Church walls
In which they lie buried,
It wakes not them,
Nor does it shake or affect them...
But yet there is a voice,
Which the dead shall hear;
The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God
And they that hear shall live.
It is a clamour, a vociferation, a shout.
It carries a penetration and a power,
A command.
Since [the time] that voice at the Creation said,
Let there be a world,
Was never heard such a voice as this.
Arise ye dead.

Because of all “the descent into hell” means or may mean, I’m grateful that I said it every Sunday as a child.

Amen.

¹³ John Donne Easter Sermon 1622 on I Thess 4:17. From Rutledge 457-458.