

Please note: The first part of this sermon was not preached from a manuscript and the first two paragraphs that follow are a summary of the sense of what I was trying to say and what I recall saying – I hope they are helpful.... Jim Simpson.

In our reading in the Old Testament from the book of Numbers we hear the people of Israel mumbling, grumbling, whining, complaining! Here they are on the road to freedom, delivered from slavery in Egypt yet their minds are full of memories of Egyptian meat, melons and cucumbers and onions and garlic! The high point of their complaints concern the manna – this, this is all we have to eat! Even though the manna was the gracious provision of God they are complaining.

This ‘hankering after a golden age’, this complaining and agitating leads to a rediscovery of a new and shared model of leadership as God instructs Moses to select a group of 70 elders of the people, upon whom God will put the same Spirit that was on Moses. Gathered together this is what happened and the Spirit even came upon Eldad and Medad even though they missed the Stewardship luncheon and stayed home in the camp! God still has ways to get through to us... God has such a call for us here at OAPC, calling us into greater participation and involvement as a community of faith.

In today’s passage in Mark’s Gospel we find Jesus talking among other things about maybe the scariest venue of all, “Hell.” Or as the footnotes indicate, that place known by the Aramaic name, “Gehenna”. “Gehenna” was and is a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem. Over many years it had been the scene of some pretty despicable deeds, it was where some rebellious and unfaithful Israelites had once offered up child sacrifices to pagan gods; it had been used as the burial ground for those slain in battle by God’s judgment. Gehenna was very like the “Killing Fields” of Cambodia or the mass graves of Srebrenica or the genocides in Rwanda or Darfur – it was a mass grave. You will not be surprised to know that Gehenna was forever condemned as an eternally unholy place.

By the time of Christ, the valley of Gehenna was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Hell, Gehenna, was a place of rot, of mutilated bodies and revulsion. To this the Old Testament adds the image of burning related to the idea of purging, of sacrificial fire destroying something that is offensive to God.

Figuratively, looking at the town dump, sensing its decay in his nostrils, tasting its stench in his throat, recalling the trash, bones and decaying carcasses, Jesus says “it would be better to pluck out your eye and go into the kingdom of God missing some part of your body, than to have your whole body thrown on the rubbish heap of Gehenna”. Though they may be missing a part of their body no child of God’s creation and love is meant for Gehenna.

Jesus is not asking his followers to literally cut off and pluck out a hand, foot, or eye. We are not to take these statements literally, however as followers of Jesus we must exercise self-discipline so that we do not get in the way of the grace God has for everyone. As one commentator puts it: “If our primary distraction is grasping after material wealth, then we need to exercise spiritual discipline over our hands. If our primary distraction is wanting to walk only with the “in-crowd”, then we must exercise spiritual discipline over our feet, going wherever God sends us. If our primary distraction is coveting every desirable thing we see then we need spiritual discipline over our eyes so we can focus on the things of God.”

Jesus stares our hellish possibilities in the face and rebukes them. Almost every week we speak this truth in the phrase the Apostles' Creed: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again." Jesus was the one who constantly descended into hell. Not just when he died, in those three days before his resurrection, but throughout his ministry. Jesus entered the homes of sinners, to dine with sinners and publicans, and Pharisees, to touch lepers, to heal beggars, to welcome children, and to befriend adulterers.

Still today Jesus enters those places that we avoid, those places that we put out on the margins, out on the edge of town – the shoddy nursing homes, the pitifully ill-equipped places for those suffering from mental illness, the homeless shelter, the run-down AIDS hospice, the town dump.

Still today Jesus enters hell – on behalf of every victim of domestic violence, into every relationship scarred by infidelity or deceit, for the sake of those who look for a way to live at the bottom of a bottle or box of pills!

Still today, Jesus enters hell in the fears and despair of those who live in some sort of shadow world due to lack of documentation or fears over what will happen to them if their enemies, or their friends, discover where they are.

Over these past weeks in the selected readings from the Gospel of Mark, we have seen Jesus confronting demons, rebuking devils, healing, driving out all that which dehumanizes and degrades. Jesus spent so much of his life with those who had reached the end of the line. In the end Jesus spent His whole life for all of us who without Him would crash and burn. Jesus was, and Jesus is the Hell Invader, Jesus is the rescuer from hell. Nowhere is Jesus ever depicted in scripture as one who condemns people to hell, but rather as one who comes urging people to avoid hell, offering to them life and hope and a new beginning. On this point Jesus' urgings are nowhere more urgent and dramatic than in this Sunday's gospel. Hell, Gehenna, is a dump and Jesus comes seeking to save the lost, to rescue them from the tragedy that is hell. Jesus is ready to get down and dirty, Jesus will get down and dirty to prevent any and all from being dumped.

Nowhere and at no time does Jesus Himself threaten people with the threat of hell in order to turn them to faith. Never does Jesus thump a pulpit, adopt an angry countenance or stir up fear in people; nowhere is this the Jesus we meet in scripture. So why, why, why are there still so many examples of people and churches who want to talk about Jesus using these tactics of domination and fear and anxiety?

As the Church which bears the name and hopefully the likeness of Jesus we are to be Hell Invaders, entering hell, keeping on and on attempting to salvage lives, to rescue people, to remind them that they are precious to God, that they are precious and beautiful, and are not destined for the ash heap of the world. Our calling, with Jesus, is not to rush to judgment but to be instruments of bringing people back to life. We are those who are to embody the great gospel message, "The kingdom of God is here. Turn around, go in a new way, received the gift of God's gracious salvation, and join a great kingdom!" And we don't ever use the real or imagined threat of hell to try and scare someone into the Kingdom, our role is always to be coming alongside, in faith and love sharing, passing on, and demonstrating love and forgiveness.

Our challenge is to enlarge our vision of the church and to realize that our church membership is no casual affair. After all being open to everyone, to the reality of the lives of others, ready to love and care and support, is a real hard thing to do. It isn't easy, it is "no Sunday School picnic" to express Christ in this way but it is what we are called to do, to be hell invaders for the sake of all people for whom Christ lived, died, and lived again, and lives still to embrace us with a love that has no end.

I do realize that if we allow the cultural baggage about hell to weigh us down this notion that I am advancing today, that we are called to be hell invaders, may not be very helpful. But as we allow the thought that Gehenna is the dumping ground, then maybe we can recover the true sense in which we are indeed asked to be and expected to be hell invaders.

You and I, we are hell invaders every time we engage with someone in need. As we share ourselves with someone who is lonely or afraid or isolated – someone in our church family or Sunday school class; someone in our street; someone at work. As we share food with those who are hungry, which we can do as we bring our donation to Project Hope, or when we serve at the Soup Kitchen.

You and I, we are hell invaders when we teach a child, when we pray for a youth, when we support a parent, when we have time to share with a college student.

You and I, we are hell invaders when we join with our partner church in Sidon or the congregations in our Presbytery, to share the story of God's love for the world with those who are tempted that God has given up on this big ol' troubled, divided world.

You and I, we are hell invaders in our regular, faithful attendance at worship; in our passionate participation in some ministry of our congregation; in our commitment to be Christ's people; in our living as dedicated disciples of our Lord; in getting past being too easily offended, in being forgiving people.

You and I are hell invaders, when we pledge our time and talent and our money to the ministry and mission of Oakland Church in order that the challenge and the comfort of God's love can be known, and shared, and lived with and for all people – offering not the threat of condemnation but the promise of renewal and redemption and restoration.

The full and active participation and involvement of our whole congregation is what is needed as our church lives into its call to be a leadership church in the life of our community. Our Old Testament passage today offers us the model of maximum and full involvement and participation. In every generation when God's people face needs and opportunities what is needed is the commitment, the engagement, the contribution of the entire church, the gifts of all us!

In all modesty, there is so much that we already do, and do well, to nurture people of all ages in their relationship with God, there is so much we do to serve those in need, there is so much we do to communicate and offer the challenge to faith.... But there is so much more we could be doing, and we can be doing some things better and stronger. This year's Stewardship focus, Stepping Up... Reaching Out... is a reminder that all of us are asked to re-dedicate ourselves, to all that God needs Oakland Church to do and be in this community and beyond. My friends, you and I, we are hell invaders as we pray together, as we worship together, as we learn together, as we study together, as we grow together,

as we share together, as we serve together, as together we live and breathe in the Holy Spirit of our
Creating, Redeeming, Restoring God! Amen.