

You may have heard that last week there was a great deal of looting going on in New York City as Hurricane Sandy was passing through. Gangs were particularly active stealing things in evacuated neighborhoods. But one gang wasn't so lucky. As they were looting they were overwhelmed by flood waters. As they were on their way to the entrance of heaven St. Peter saw them coming. They were a particularly rough looking bunch and St. Peter became scared. He ran to God and said, "God, there are some evil thieving New Yorkers at the Pearly Gates. What do I do?" God replied, "Just do what you would normally do with that type. Re-direct them down to hell." St. Peter went back to carry out the order and all of a sudden he came running back yelling, "God, God, they're gone! They're gone!"

"Who, the New Yorkers?"

"No, the Pearly Gates!"

Here on All Saints Sunday it is a good time to talk about heaven and hell. Regardless of what your understanding of these things are, they are largely irrelevant concepts to most people in our culture around us. For example if you went down to

Eastview Mall and started talking to everybody who walked by saying, "If you don't truly believe in your heart that Jesus is the Lord and Savior you will spend all of eternity tormented in hell," people would think you're strange. Most people I encounter have some foggy idea of heaven. They've never really thought about hell at all. And they think that all basically good people go to heaven. They, of course, count themselves among the basically good people.

Questions about heaven and hell, about grace and accountability are all important for us. They tell us a lot about God and a lot about our purpose as a community of faith.

Many people in our society today are basically universalists. That means they believe everybody goes to heaven. These people have some sense that there is a God and that God is gracious and loving. Lutherans should love to see this mindset so prevalent in the world. However, there are problems. On the surface universalism is a very appealing idea. It fits with the idea of a loving God. After all how can you call God loving if there is eternal punishment for some people?

But to embrace this idea is to embrace lots of problems. If there is universal salvation then why bother with Jesus? Why bother with Christianity? Why bother being part of a community of faith? Why bother with giving an offering, or having any discipline in life? The church then is totally irrelevant.

And many people go there in their thoughts - that's obvious by the fact that most people in our country claim to believe in God but only a small percentage actually make worship attendance a part of their lives. And if the church is irrelevant, then fine. The secular humanist movement that rules our society says just that.

But they overlook one really big thing - the problem of pain. If God is loving and everyone goes to heaven then why is there pain and suffering? Why are there natural disasters? Why is there abuse, neglect, and hatred? To cite an old cartoon, Jesus is hanging on the cross and says, "If I'm okay, and you're okay then why am I hanging up here?" No, things are not okay. Ideas of universalism just don't work.

Questions of heaven and hell cannot be answered easily. If you put too much stress on hell and damnation then you get into trouble with God being loving. If you put too much stress on heaven and forgiveness then you take away God's ability to hold people accountable for their actions.

I do not have any easy answers. I say that you have to let God be God. God is gracious and loving, but God's power is not to be mocked either. Luther often wrote that we are to fear and love God; acknowledging both God's love and power.

If the Bible is our authoritative source for information about God and faith we have to understand it gives us very few answers. Most of what people believe about heaven and hell have been created by painters and sculptors, not biblical scholars. When the Bible talks about heaven it is often referring to the sky and space - it is talking about "up there." Jesus didn't use heaven in that way. When he talked about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven he was referring to life on earth - specifically the community of faith bringing God's life principles into reality on earth.

The Bible is similarly vague about hell. The Old Testament has no concept of hell whatsoever. It does talk about a realm of the dead but it is not developed. When Jesus talks about hell he usually uses the word Gehenna - which was the name of the valley south of Jerusalem. It was a literal place that had come to have symbolic meaning for Jews. Jesus speaks of it as an image - like his parables, and never literally.

In 2 Peter and Jude we truly come across the idea of hell. But there the authors are using the Greek mythological understanding of hell. Once again it is an image used to make a different point, not a developed concept. Ultimately we are left without answers and without any authoritative way to find them.

Jesus was asked what heaven and hell were like. He never describes them, at least not that they are recorded. And he probably has good reason. Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

The truth is heaven and hell are simply beyond our human capacity to understand. Jesus couldn't teach what we couldn't understand. It would be like trying to teach calculus to a newborn baby. What the Bible does teach is that heaven is good, it is wonderful, more wonderful than we could possibly imagine. And if we want a taste of it in our lives here on earth, we should live in gracious love with one another.

As for hell, is it eternal or just temporary? Again, the Bible doesn't give a clear answer. It hints in a few places that all things - death and hell included - will ultimately be swallowed up by God's love. But again, this is not strongly developed.

My one colleague, the Rev. Mary Johnson, has a description of heaven and hell that I think are very helpful, and they are very biblical as they come from Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of John.

She says that people have to remember that when we say God is eternal that does not mean that he has existed forever and will exist forever. It means that God is *timeless* - God is

outside of time itself. The key thing that Jesus revealed about God's nature is that he is loving and invites you into a loving relationship with him.

-And so, if you have a loving relationship with God during life then you are creating something eternal.

-If you hate God during this lifetime you are creating something eternal.

-If you reject God or have no relationship with God at all then you are creating something eternal.

It all means that your actions have consequences while letting God still be loving. Again, that is what the Gospel of John teaches.

It is a mystery. It always has been, and it always will be, until God decides to reveal more. Whatever is the case, we can rest assured on some things. God promises good and wonderful things in heaven. There will be no more crying, no more pain. There will be no more hardship or struggles. All will be well. Existence will be good, very good. In fact, more wonderful than our human minds can ever imagine on this side of the resurrection. Let us live always in that wonderful hope.

Amen