

My Favorite Part of the Creed

1 Peter 3:13-22

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“In which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison....”
“He descended to the dead....”

Our Favorite(s)

I imagine if we stopped and took time for responses, all of us could name our favorite song or TV show or movie. It might be hard to pick just one, of course, and so we’d have to let the more indecisive people hem and haw and in the end pick more than one. But we could definitely name our favorites if we had to.

So what about your favorite book of the Bible? Or chapter in the Bible, or even verse in the Bible? And no, John 3:16 is not allowed. Neither is “Jesus wept.” (That’s John 11:35 in case you are wondering.) You can’t pick either of those!

I suspect this is a harder task for most of us. But why? Is it because we are torn between our love of Matthew and, oh I don’t know, Leviticus? “I just can’t decide!” Or between John and Philippians? Or is it because, to be completely candid for a moment, we don’t know our Bibles very well, and not nearly as well as we know our TV shows, music, and movies.

And just to continue in this mode of making-us-all-feel-guilty-this-morning, here’s another question to ponder: What’s your favorite part of the Apostles’ Creed? Do you have one? And, if so, one final question: why is that your favorite part?

Now it’s probably not very nice for me to stand up here and lay on the guilt— not without running the gauntlet first. So, if I had to pick just one song, it’d be “How I Remember You” by the jazz singer Michael Franks, largely because I’ve sung it to each of my children since the day they were born. Franks is also my favorite singer, if you forced me to pick. Favorite TV show? Probably the discontinued *Friday Night Lights*. Favorite movie? Probably *The Shawshank Redemption*. Favorite book of the Bible? Wow, that’s hard for a Bible professor! Give me top five! Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalms. And my favorite part of the Creed? The line that is sometimes left out of our worship services. It’s the line that says, “descended to the dead.” Some of you may not even know that that line is in the Creed. But it is! It comes right after Jesus “was crucified, died, and was buried” and right before “on the third day he rose again.” In between those two lines is—or is *supposed* to be—this line: “He descended to the dead.” That’s my favorite part of the Apostles’ Creed.

At this point, you might have some questions for me: “Why is *that* your favorite part, anyway? Why is it left out? And what does it mean?” Well, I’m glad you asked, because that’s what the rest of this sermon is all about.

Why Is It Left Out?

So, first, let’s talk about why this line is left out. The *United Methodist Hymnal* gives two versions of the Apostles’ Creed, the traditional and the ecumenical. We read the traditional version just now—it’s the version that omits the line about Jesus’

descent. But calling this version “traditional” is odd, because the part about Jesus’ descent is a very ancient part of the Creed—which means it is *completely* “traditional”!¹ So why does the “traditional” version leave it out?

I suspect it is the same reason that people often leave out, substitute something else, or carefully define the word “catholic” in the Creed—you know, in the part where we say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church.” “Catholic,” in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, has two little asterisks next to it, directing you to a footnote that clarifies that the word “catholic” (with lower-case “c”) in this context means “universal,” not “Catholic” (with a capital “C”) as in “Roman Catholic.” I mean, we are Methodists after all! And those who aren’t Roman Catholic are sometimes confused or worried by the presence of the word “catholic” in the Creed.

I suspect the same holds true for the words “he descended to the dead” or, in a different, probably better translation of the original Latin of the Creed, “he descended into hell.”² In Latin that last word is *infernus*; just hearing it, you can tell it is related to our own word “inferno.” Think of Dante’s book by that name in which the main character takes a guided tour of hell.³

Now some people—like my grandmother, for instance (may she rest in peace)—just are not going to say the word “hell” in church, or the word “catholic” for that matter, unless they can say them together!⁴

I suspect, then, that my favorite part of the Creed is left out for the same reason that the word “catholic” has asterisks next to it. Because many people just don’t understand what this line means, and it somehow offends their sensibilities.⁵ But if we knew what this part means, then maybe we wouldn’t be offended—maybe we would even be helped and encouraged.⁶ Instead, in our attempts to pacify my Grandma Jensen and other well-meaning individuals, we end up censoring the Creed, striking something that it wants us to have—something that the early Church that gave us the Creed thought was crucial for us to have.

Where Does This Come From?

But why does the Creed contain this part, and why did the early Church think it was so important to include it? It wasn’t just made up out of thin air, after all, and it certainly wasn’t made up to offend the Grandma Jensens of the world. Where did it come from? Well from several places actually,⁷ one of which we heard this morning. In 1 Peter 3, we read that Christ, “by the Spirit...went to preach to the spirits in prison”—spirits that are said to be “disobedient” and that are associated with “the time of Noah” (vv. 19-20). This is a very intriguing passage, but 1 Peter doesn’t say much more about it, switching topics abruptly (or so it would seem) to baptism.

But there are other texts besides 1 Peter 3, texts like Matthew 27, which says that when Jesus died, “the tombs...were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had died were raised” (vv. 52-53; NRSV+CEB). Now how did that happen? Or Ephesians 4, which asks: “What does the phrase ‘[Christ] ascended’ mean if it doesn’t mean that he had first gone down into the lower regions of the earth? The one who descended is the same one who ascended...” (vv. 9-10; NRSV+CEB). Or, back to 1 Peter, chapter 4 this time, which states that “the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead” (v. 6; NRSV).

There are still other passages we might consider,⁸ but the Creed itself, even without the part about Christ’s descent, implies it in the very next line: “On the third day he

rose *from the dead*.” This is Ephesians all over again: you can’t rise up if you haven’t first descended. And since Jesus rose *from* the dead, that means he must have first gone down *to* the dead. So, “he descended into hell” is implied in the Creed even if we leave that specific line out. Whatever the case, it’s clear that this part about Christ’s descent isn’t made up out of thin air, but is based on these tantalizing little tidbits of Scripture scattered here and there in the New Testament. But what do they mean? How do we make sense of them?

What Does It Mean?

Well, given the long history of the Church, it should come as no surprise that there is more than one interpretation of this line of the Creed and of the doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell. There are a lot of interpretations, in fact, but two main ones.⁹

The first is that during the three days that Jesus lay dead, he was down there, in Hell, *taking care of business*.¹⁰ He was fighting the devil, *mano-y-mano*, tête-à-tête, in hand-to-hand combat, to see who would have the keys to death. And Jesus wins! Of course! I’d like to think it was a sweet roundhouse back kick Bruce Lee style that knocked the last tooth out of the devil’s ugly mouth. Regardless, in this interpretation of the descent, Jesus is fighting for us, snatching the keys of Death and the Grave (Rev 1:18) in order to set us all free. The idea is captured by something Jesus says early in John 5: “I assure you that the time is coming—and is here!—when the dead will hear the voice of God’s Son, and those who hear it will live” (5:25). Imagine that: Jesus down there in Hell, doing work and taking names! What’s not to like about that?

The second interpretation is that during the three days that Jesus lay dead, he was down there, in Hell, *holding revival*. He was preaching to all those who didn’t have a chance to hear him before he came. All the great saints of the Old Testament are lining up to hear the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but so are all the others—the non-saintly, if you will, the disobedient ones who, according to 1 Peter, are in prison but who now have a chance to hear and decide to repent and believe the good news.¹¹ Imagine that: Jesus preaching the greatest revival the world—or *underworld*—has ever seen. What’s not to like about that?

Why Does It Matter?

There are other interpretations, but those are my two favorite ones for my favorite part of the Creed. Both get at why this part of the Creed is so important and why we should include it, say it every time we recite the Creed, and never, ever censor it out.

Here’s why the line is so important: We all know Jesus died. The line about his descent to hell says *yet more still*—it shows us just how far he is willing to go. Christ didn’t just dip his toe in the cold waters of death and say, “Oh, you’re right, that *really* is unfortunate; I feel very sorry for all you human types, *really* I do.” No, Jesus went the whole way: he was put to death as a criminal, buried by others in a borrowed tomb, was truly dead—for three days. There’s no coming back from that. That isn’t just dipping your toe in the cold waters of death to test the temperature. That’s full immersion, that’s drowning all the way to the bottom of the Mariana trench, into the deepest recesses of the earth, like Ephesians says, or all the way to hell, as the Creed says. Why? Why would Jesus do that?

Listen to this:

So that the work of God might be done!

So the word of God might be heard!

Listen to this:

There's no place God will not go to find even one lost sheep.¹²

There's no place God cannot reach to reclaim God's very own.¹³

That's what "he descended to the dead" means. That's why it matters. That's why we should say it. Never censor it.

According to Dante's *Inferno*, there is an inscription over the gates of Hell. It reads: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." Not according to the Creed, you see. Not according to the Creed! According to the Creed, Jesus himself walked through those gates, going all the way, fighting the good fight, preaching the good news, and Jesus then walked back through those gates again, the other direction this time, with a new set of keys jingling on his belt, with little lost sheep, one under each arm, and a whole host of others following in his train (Eph 4:8; Ps 68:18).¹³ In the descent to hell, Jesus is all in. God is all in. The Spirit is all in. All in *for* us.¹⁴

Another author, one far more recent than Dante, has captured this beautifully. Calvin Miller, in his book *The Singer*, retells the story of Jesus as a singer who sings Earthmaker's (God's) song of love. In one passage, the Singer has an exchange with the devil, called the World Hater, about hell, the Canyon of the Damned. Here it is:

The Singer woke at midnight....

The air was full of moans. With groans of grief and pity, the night was crying. He had never heard the darkness cry before.

"Where are you, World Hater?" he shouted.

"Standing in the doorway of the worlds—reveling in my melodies of ugliness and death."

The Singer listened. The morbid air depressed him and he could not help but weep himself. He ached from the despair. "How long have they cried...?" he asked.

The World Hater seemed to summon up the volume of their moaning and then he shouted, "They've moaned a million years. It never stops....Crying is the only thing they know."

"Poor souls! Have they nothing to look back upon with joy?" the Singer asked.

"No. Nor anything to look forward to with hope."

"Could they never give up suffering for one small moment, every thousand years or so?"

"No. Never. They ache in simply knowing they will never cease to ache."

"I'm coming to the Canyon of the Damned you know."

"You dare not think that you could sing above their anguished dying that never will be dead."

"You'll see, World Hater. I will come."

"It's my domain!" the Hater protested.

"You have no domain. How dare you think that you can hold some corner of Earthmaker's universe and make it your own private horror chamber!"

"It is forever, Singer!"

"Yes, but not off-limits to the song. I'll smash the gates that hold the damned and every chain will fall away. I'll sing to every suffering cell of hate, the love song of my soul. I'll stand upon the torment of the Canyon of the Damned."

The troubled air grew still. The World Hater stepped outside the universe—pulled shut the doorway of the worlds.

And Crying softly slept with Joy.¹⁵

"I'm coming to the Canyon of the Damned you know." It is "not off-limits to the song." That, in two short sentences, is what "he descended into hell" means.

Our Descent and New Life

One more thing. You might remember from the New Testament lesson that, right after speaking of Christ's descent to the dead, I Peter 3 states simply, "Baptism is like that" (3:21). First Peter links our initiation into Christian faith—our baptism—with Christ's descent into hell.¹⁶ Because of our baptism, because of Christ's death, we shouldn't live our lives according to our desires, "but in ways determined by God's will," the letter says (4:2). That's why the good news was preached to the dead, it continues, so that all might "live by the Spirit according to divine standards" (4:6; CEB).

The apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans: if we died with Christ, and have been buried with him (and that includes descended with him), then we are also made alive in him and can walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). So we can, we *should*, live our lives better now, differently now—as different as life is from death. We should live our lives like people for whom God went to the greatest of lengths and to the deepest of depths, even to the darkest corner of hell.

And what's not to like about that, even if you don't like the word *hell*? It sounds like the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to me. *That's* why "he descended to the dead" is my favorite part of the creed. What's yours?

Notes

1 See "Descent of Christ into Hell, The," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 472: the earliest attestation is in the 4th c. (Fourth Creed of Sirmium of 359). Rufinus discusses it in his *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (c. 404 AD).

2 *descendit ad inferna* or *ad inferos*. See James F. Kay, "He Descended into Hell," in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 118-19, for a discussion (he ultimately deems them synonyms). J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed.; London: Continuum, 1972), 378 n. 3 thinks *inferos* is preferred as the place of the departed, not the damned.

3 Actually English *inferno* is an Italian loanword from the Latin *infernus*.

4 Kay points out that the word *hell* is linked only to Jesus in the Creed ("He Descended," 118, see also 126 n. 19 on the sanitizing of the Creed, perhaps because of the "innumerable 'hells' of this world").

5 The issue with Wesley's censorship of the creed at this point and Article III of the Anglican Articles of Religion is a bit more complex, especially as he retained the descent in daily prayer and in the baptismal

liturgy. See Heather Hahn, "Did Jesus descend into hell or to the dead?" (online at: <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/did-jesus-descend-into-hell-or-to-the-dead>; accessed 6/7/14). Hahn indicates that the line was gone in American Methodism by 1792 but restored in the 20th century due to ecumenical interests. Rex Mathews has informed me (personal communication) that the omission can be traced in various editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* and is no doubt bound up with anti-Catholic positions, especially regarding purgatory. See now Jerry Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

6 Note Calvin who called this line "the sum of our redemption" (see Kay, "He Descended," 117).

7 See, inter alia, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 179-81; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 379.

8 John 5:25 (cf. Matt 12:39-40; Rom 10:7); Heb 2:14-15 (cf. Acts 3:15). See also Rom 14:9 ("Lord of both the dead and the living"); Col 1:18; Acts 2:27-31 (note Ps 16:8ff.); Heb 11:39-40; 12:22-23; 10:20; Luke 23:43; also Eph 4:5; Phil 2:10.

9 See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 380-83, on the two that follow (liberation and revival).

10 Attributed first to Melancthon by Scott Black Johnston, "A Good Friday Sermon: Harrowing," in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 130-35. Kay also finds the liberation motif in Rufinus ("He Descended," 120-21).

11 Not all in the history of interpretation would agree to the latter clause. See Kay, "He Descended," 122; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 381 and n. 7.

12 Luke 15:1-7. Cf. the Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 181: "He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep...[H]e has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him."

14 Kay, "He Descended," 121: "Rather than the final act of the passion, the descent into hell can be taken as the first act of the resurrection."

15 Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 382, citing Pseudo-Fulgentius: "He, so merciful and blessed, mercifully visited the region of our misery, so as to escort us to the region of His blessedness."

16 Miller, *The Singer Trilogy*, 63-65.

17 See further Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 94: "Burial with Christ would then mean, we were standing under His *Name* as actually those for whom that took place, who now may *live* as those for whom it did take place."