



Eight Preachers Go to Hell

Reflections on the place no one wants to go

Heaven and Hell Are the Same Place
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'Existing Peaceably'

When 'Eight Preachers Go To Hell' arrived hot off the press, I could not wait to get my hands on it. I wanted to see what my clergy colleagues had to say about the matter that we never talk about in our tradition. (And perhaps to see if I was going there too.) All eight reflections were enlightening, but the one I like best for this consideration of 'peace' on this second Sunday in Advent was, 'No Other Way In Hell' by Kenneth Samuel.

'A man died and went straight to hell. Upon his arrival, he looked around and thought to himself, "This isn't so bad." In the first place, hell had air conditioning. And he noticed that a lot of his friends were there. There was a copious spread of food on a nearby table, wonderful mood lighting and nice music emanating from a thumping sound system as people mingled and chanted. A very attractive woman approached the man and asked: "Would you like to dance?" He responded: "Sure!" So they stepped out on the dance floor, and he had a great time as he showed off his best dance moves while she smiled and giggled. But after dancing and laughing for a while, he grew tired, so he said to the woman: "Thanks for the dance. I think I'll stop now and go get refreshed." She looked at him squarely and replied: "No, you can't do that. You have forgotten that this is hell. And in hell, everyone must keep dancing to the same music with the same partner. And the music never stops." This story was told by Howard Thurman. It is his depiction of hell. It is also mine. Hell, for me, is any place or any situation in which there are no options. Growing up poor in the South Bronx of New York City did not present very many options for me. Life in the ghetto rarely does. There are cycles of co-dependency, cycles of addiction and cycles of dysfunction that are reinforced and perpetuated by cycles of poverty. And there are many who meander within the ghetto confines of few to no options all of their lives. But thank God for the options to ghetto life that were presented to me through the church and through education. The church said to me: "you can choose a life that is more abundant. You can choose a life that is governed by a faith in God who makes all things possible. You do not have to be limited by your

circumstances, because through Christ, all things are possible. Education said to me: "there is a world beyond the conditions of your current circumstances. Knowledge and intelligence can take you there. If you apply yourself to your educational pursuit, you will have options in your career and options in your lifestyle that will open the world to you." Neither of them has disappointed. The avoidance of hell for me has been in the availability of options. But for those who perceive that they have no options, life is a living hell. No option to low wages. No option to substandard education. No option to low income housing. No option to poverty, dysfunction, and co-dependency. No options for the future. No options can easily give way to feelings of desperation. And desperation can easily give way to mindsets of despair. And people who live with despair pose a grave danger to themselves and to others. This is the hell that threatens all of us—whether it comes from the person in the simmering ghettos of America or the person in the volatile regions of the Middle East. The answer to desperation and despair is in providing accessible, affordable, viable options for better living. With viable options, the onus is on the individual. Without viable options, the onus is upon all of us. And we all will surely catch hell if we do not work to ensure that viable options are available to everyone. We cannot exist peacefully as an island of plenty and abundant options in a sea of poverty and few to no options. The prospect of spending eternity in hell—a place of no options, is precisely what motivates me to take full advantage of every option that is currently made available to me by God's Amazing Grace. To have choices in life is a privilege. And each of our decisions does have consequences. In Deuteronomy 30:19, God says to God's people: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." The choice to live is divinely endowed to everyone and should be reflected in everyone's inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But if we choose despair instead of hope, if we choose defeat instead of perseverance; if we limit our temporal lives by choosing not to be open to eternal possibilities, we, in essence, choose to go to hell. Our choices have generational and eternal consequences.

Life is a choice. Hell is either reneging on that choice, or having no choice at all.'

One of my favorite Advent hymns for reminding me that I can choose the life of heaven rather than hell, is 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer,
our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
O come, Thou wisdom from on high,
and order all things, far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and cause us in her ways to go.

O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart
and mind; bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, Shall come to thee, O Israel.

