

Last week I shared some stories of how Presbyterian churches are different in how they serve Communion.

Interestingly enough, the same can be said about the part of the worship service in which we recite an Affirmation of Faith.

More and more, congregations are like this one in which we are able to choose from the grand history of our faith, our creeds and confessions and affirmations from across the centuries as people of faith articulated what it means to believe, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

There are some, though, that do not have an Affirmation of Faith in their worship; and some still say only the Apostles’ Creed, week after week.

That’s what I grew up with, in the old southern Presbyterian church, using the red hymnbook, and it was printed on page 12.

Before I memorized it, I always had my finger on that page as we got close to the Affirmation in the worship service, so I could start with everybody else.

Because if I had to look for the page, by the time I said, “I believe,” the rest of the church was sitting on the right hand!

And in that hymnbook, there was an asterisk by the phrase “he descended into hell.”

The reason for the asterisk was written at the bottom of the page: “Some churches omit this.”

Why would they omit this phrase? Why not “he descended into hell”?

When I was in seminary and would go to a church as a student preacher, I learned to always ask about the Apostles’ Creed before the service whether or not they sent Jesus to hell!

If they did omit that phrase, they really couldn’t say why: always done it that way...some preacher suggested it and we never went back...since we had the option, we took it!

In our hymnbook, there is no option. There’s not much argument that this phrase “he descended into hell” was in the earliest forms of the Apostles’ Creed, but I know some people who still take the option and don’t say it.

There was discussion as late as 60 years ago in the southern Presbyterian Church about whether this phrase belonged; that this phrase was “sometimes objected to as liable to misinterpretation.”

But if you omit everything that is liable to misinterpretation, then pretty soon you would probably omit the whole Bible!

Yes, some people might misinterpret this phrase. Some people might wish to omit it – so what difference does it make whether we say in our affirmation of faith that Jesus descended into hell?

First of all, the Bible is showing us that Jesus’ ministry is to anybody and everybody who is separated from God, living or dead, it is the truth of the Psalm that we read.

Psalm 139 is an eloquent affirmation of God’s ever-present grace: “*Where shall I go from your Spirit, where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there...If I make my bed in hell, you are there.*”

Jesus is the incarnation of that psalm.

Peter is speaking to the early church’s belief that Jesus descended into hell and preached the good news to the dead, not as a matter of our last chance at salvation, like a last chance gas station as you get ready to cross the desert, but as a sign of the unlimited love of God in Jesus Christ.

Peter is simply writing what he knows, what he remembers Jesus saying, *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Just as Paul wrote to the Romans that *“neither death nor life...NOTHING shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Throughout the Old Testament and frequently in the New Testament, hell is described in terms of a prison, a place where one is locked away with no relationship to God.

When I was in the sixth grade, I was sent to the Principal; my only trip ever to that office (not that I didn't deserve other trips, it was just that this was the one time I was caught!)

The school bus driver had caught me, along with a few others, throwing green plums out the bus windows and scoring hits on anybody standing on the side of the road!

The Principal called my parents. At supper, nothing was said, which meant I was really going to catch it later.

At my bedtime, my parents called me into their room. Do you know my punishment? They let my guilt and fear work on me because they told me to choose my own punishment!

Double damnation! I knew I was going to be punished, and if I gave myself too light a punishment, it would only get worse!!

So I gave it to me, grounded myself for two weeks: home from school and straight to my room, no TV, no playing outside, no new comic books, and this included both weekends!

For a sixth grader, that's hell!

More than punishment for a school boy prank, though, for anybody, isn't it, to be cut off, separated from life, that's hell.

Just ask a child being bullied... families in the midst of job loss and economic earthquakes... widows, widowers... they can tell you about hell.

So much of the tragedy after 9/11, families of victims of the monstrous gun violence in this country, suddenly alone, separated from the one you love.

Those who have been abused, assaulted and suffer in silence because of the power of the one who abused, assaulted them.

Solitary confinement where the soul is broken, beat down.

This text in Peter's letter affirms that God's love is so powerful that it reaches into our places of hell and offers the grace and mercy and courage and hope of Christ's love.

Look at Peter's own story. Jesus had told him, *“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*

Yet, Peter had not been able to protect Jesus from being arrested; Peter had denied even knowing Jesus.

Don't you think Peter felt he had locked himself into hell, the prison gates of hell shut behind him as he deserted his Lord.

The hurt he felt as he had inflicted such wounds on his friend Jesus. We know those hurts we have given to people whom we've loved, like Peter finding ourselves on the inside of the gates of hell,

But Peter knows what it is like to have God's love in Christ break through to those locked away in the hell of their life.

It does make a difference to know that there is no limit to God's love in Jesus Christ.

And finally, the phrase “he descended into hell” completes Jesus' identification with us in our humanity.

One of the earliest arguments in the church was about the humanity of Jesus: was Jesus all man? All God? God before birth, alive as a man, and then God again when the man died?

For Peter, the reality of the resurrection proved for him the divinity of Jesus, and in this text, he is saying that Jesus was so human, he descended into hell.

He was one like us: enduring, bearing the consequences of sin and death. Jesus has lived and died in the hell humans create.

To be human is to know that life is simply not the prosperity of the Proverbs, but also includes the suffering of Job.

Like the woman who told me that, for her, this phrase was the most treasured part of the creed.

When I asked her why, she answered simply, "Because hell is where I spend most of my life."

Hell – the dark night of the soul, a sense of being forsaken, a place of despair, a time when the day's own troubles are more than enough for today.

We have been there, and Jesus has been there with us, yoked in faith so that when our world is falling apart, we do not fall away.

Jesus experienced, as one of us, the reality of hell for each one of us.

When he cries out from the cross, "*my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" it becomes so clear that Jesus has gone the whole way for my sake and yours so that we can join him as sons and daughters of God.

That's why we say, "he descended into hell."

It makes a difference. Because we believe, we know there is no separation we can feel from God, but that Jesus has shared that feeling.

It makes a difference. Because there is never a time in my life when I feel I've been to hell and back, but that Jesus understands my agony.

When we say, "he descended into hell", we can add the words "for me."

He descended into hell for you, for me, for each one of us.

There is no depth to which Jesus will not go to pick us up and bring us to himself.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.