

HOLY FRIDAY RETREAT 2018 WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

I. BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS: What is the Harrowing of Hades?

Let's go back to where we began -- in the Garden of Eden, where a cunning serpent told Eve that she would not die from eating this fruit, but would become like a god, knowing both good and evil. He wasn't exactly lying, and he wasn't telling the truth either -- he was a trickster. The serpent, the devil, was pretending to be Eve's friend, but truly he was plotting her downfall and tricking her into causing the fall of all creation. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and invited sin and death into the world, sickness and death became part of our normal experience. Adam and Eve would die, their children would die, and for all generations, everyone would eventually die.

But where did all those people go when they died? Well, not to heaven and not to hell. They all went together, whether they were good guys or bad guys, whether they loved God or not, to Hades. And the devil was down there, keeping them locked inside.

Until one day, Jesus died on a cross and entered Hades. The devil let Him in happily, delighted to see that God had been so ridiculous as to become fully man, a weak and mortal human being. The Son of God, attacked by the forces of sin and evil and death, was delivered right there into the devil's hands. In the ultimate victory, the devil would lock the Son of God into Hades.

But Jesus Christ, while fully man, is also fully God, and He cannot be held by death. The gates of Hades close behind Him, and what does Christ do? He rises and breaks open the gates! Hades cannot hold Him, for God is so much bigger and more powerful than death. God is the source of all life, and death simply cannot hold Him. The gates of Hades broke apart, and all of Hades was destroyed.

When Christ tears down those gates, all of those souls – the good and the bad, including Adam and Eve and Abraham and Joseph and the Three Holy Youths and everyone we know from the Old Testament and all of those souls we never heard about – have all been held in Hades, but now they are all free! No longer will the gates of Hades hold them away from God. They are all free now, to head for the light, to go to heaven and to be with God.

And as Hades is destroyed, the devil remains there in the darkness, empty-handed and defeated, as Christ triumphs over him. As our hymns say, Christ has “tricked the trickster” because what the devil thought would be his greatest victory is revealed to be his terrible defeat.

This story answers major questions that arise in our spiritual journeys:

- Why did Jesus have to die? (*He had to take on human flesh and then, in that flesh, enter Hades to destroy it.*)

- What about all those souls who were unlucky enough to die before Christ? They never heard of him. Are they saved? Do they have a chance? (*Christ goes to them in Hades and preaches to them — they are given a chance to be saved. “Thus, He also descended and preached to the spirits in prison. In the past, those had been disobedient” (1 Peter 3:19) Even those who died in the floods in Noah’s time — because there was no good left on earth — will hear Christ in Hades and have the opportunity to follow Him.*)

The author’s preface to the graphic novel says, “What I am about to tell you may or may not have happened, but it is the truth.” It is the truth — although we don’t really know whether it happened concretely, or whether it’s more like a metaphorical description of how Christ conquers death. Perhaps this has been given to us like a parable because we can’t understand salvation in all its abstraction, and we require a story to understand. We don’t always know how concretely to take a teaching like this, but this teaching is embedded throughout our church hymnography, and gives us an entry point into understanding the great mystery of salvation.

St. John Chrysostom refers to the Harrowing of Hades in his famous Paschal sermon. He talks about Hades (Hell in this translation), and we cry out, “It was embittered!” We mean that Hades and the devil were embittered, because:

It took a body, and met God face to face.

It took earth, and encountered Heaven.

It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!

Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!

Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!

Christ is risen, and life reigns!

Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave.

For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages.

Amen.

2. BASIC RETREAT STRUCTURE

— for older groups, we have a graphic novel called *Anastasis: The Harrowing of Hades* which we'll be giving out. We have 50 copies and the plan is to give them to 3rd grade through adult, but we'll have to adjust on the fly. Let's make an effort to give only one to a family (unless we have a kid who is totally into it and wants his own copy — that's a blessing and we'll make room for it!)

— for younger students, the graphic novel is a little dark, so we will have a coloring book that tells the same story in a shorter, lighter way. I'll email that around as soon as it's finished so that you can see it in advance.

We'll meet in the church at 1:00pm and divide everyone into smaller discussion groups. We will split into different areas — older groups will remain in the church (one group upstairs, one downstairs, one in the cry room, etc.) and younger groups will head over to the Hall.

Each group will learn about the Harrowing of Hades and discuss it in an age-appropriate way, and then we'll reconvene and have representatives from each group tell us something they learned or found interesting. They can present a poster, a skit, or simply stand up and tell us something. Group leaders are encouraged to provide large pieces of paper and markers (available in the Sunday School Supply Closet) if the group wishes to draw something, etc.

1:10pm - 2:15 discussion (and preparation of presentation)

2:20 convene in church for presentations

3:00 Descent from the Cross service

THE LESSON

Teach the basic story of the Harrowing of Hades:

- When people died back before Jesus' resurrection, they went to Hades
- Both good and bad people were there, but good were in the Bosom of Abraham
- Who was in Hades? Who can they think of?
(Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, etc.)
- They could not go to be with God, but were separated from Him.
- Imagine everyone there waiting in Hades.
- Tell stories of some Saints who went to Hades and told them that Christ was born!
 - St. Simeon, the old man who held Jesus as a baby (presented in the Temple)
 - St. Elizabeth, baby leapt in her womb because Christ was in Mary's stomach
 - St. John the Forerunner, told everyone Jesus was the Lamb of God and they should follow Him. Now he's been killed and is telling the people in Hades that Jesus is coming!
- Remind them of the story of Lazarus: what does that look like from Hades?
 - Lazarus joins them, then a voice calls him out and he goes!
- Christ dies on the cross, and the devil lets Him into Hades because He is human
- But once He is inside, He cannot be held and breaks open the gates, destroys Hades
- He urges everyone to repent, to join God in heaven (salvation is always a choice.)

Making it Age-Appropriate For younger classes:

- Gather some peg dolls or puppets to act out the story
- Have the kids act out the story, either as specific characters or just Hades' occupants
- Consider creating an actual "Hades" with furniture or chairs, or under a sheet.
- Use the coloring book to tell the story or after

Leading Discussions with Older Classes:

— Use the graphic novel, pointing out some favorite quotes and characters

Examples:

Bottom of page 4, St. Simeon (white box)

King David, p. 8

John the Forerunner, p. 9

John the Forerunner goes to Abraham's Bosom, pp 10-11

The righteous in Hades try to predict Christ's coming, pp 12-13

Lazarus raised, p. 19

Crucifixion, p.24

Who is the King of Glory, p. 31 (note we will say this on Saturday night!)

Resurrection of Adam & Eve, p. 35

Christ preaches to the dead, p. 36

Conversations:

— What does it mean in the preface when the author says, "What I am about to tell you may or may not have happened, but it is the truth."?

— What is death and how is it helpful to personify death in this way?

— Consider the very familiar Paschal sermon of St. John Chrysostom (p. 41)

— All year, we have been learning the Old Testament. Note how the various people from the OT are portrayed here, consider the things they say and how they interact with one another.

— Look at the back pages of the book to understand the sources from which all of this is drawn.

(Everyone should take the graphic novel or coloring book home with them.)

FINALLY, PLAN YOUR GROUP PRESENTATION, ETC.