

Sermon: Salted with Fire

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50**

Introduction: The people that know me from other churches know that every now and then I promise hellfire and brimstone – HF&B. Today could be the day, and I say that because Jesus said it. It's in the Bible.

Trouble in the text: Today's Gospel reading follows immediately from last week's reading, which ended with Jesus saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Then John interrupts and says they saw an unknown exorcist casting out demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples took offense because "he was not following *us*." This other someone was not of their group. Here, the issue of authority crops up again, as it did last week when Jesus caught the disciples arguing about who among them was the greatest. The Twelve seem to be claiming a monopoly on deeds of power.

This becomes a teachable moment for Jesus, who tells them that "Whoever is not against us is for us." It doesn't matter who does the work as long as it gets done.

Next, he warns them of the consequences of putting out stumbling blocks before the 'little ones,' who are people like you and me, who believe in Jesus. Do that, and you might as well tie a millstone around your neck and throw yourself into the sea.

Then comes the hellfire and brimstone part.

Jesus tells the disciples that it would be better for them to enter the kingdom of God maimed if your hand, or your foot, or your eye, cause you to stumble, and you cut them off or pull them out. If you fail to remove the cause of your stumbling, you can look forward to being thrown into Gehenna, the unquenchable fire.

In other words, we're responsible for our own fate, and Jesus doesn't sugarcoat it. He doesn't say, hey, it might sting a little bit. He makes it clear that it will hurt; it will burn; it will change you, and it's entirely avoidable.

Turning to James' letter for a moment, what's Elijah doing in there? James tells us that Elijah "prayed fervently that it might not rain." This is a reference to an extended story told in First Kings, in chapters 17 and 18, *except* Elijah didn't pray for a drought. God caused it, in response to King Ahab, who, Scripture tells us, "Did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). James may have been making a point about the power of prayer, but it seems like an odd thing to drop in there.

Grace in the text: James was a brother of Jesus and a leader of the church in Jerusalem. This pedigree gave him authority and insight, and people listened when he spoke. His letter includes a series of moral instructions intended for people who wanted to adopt a 'courageous faith,' as the late Bible scholar and New Testament professor Cain Hope Felder put it, to help them cope with life's trials. We read James' letter for the same reasons. His emphasis on prayer comes at the end of the letter, as we heard today.

He says 'the prayer of faith' will save the sick and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. These are not two separate things. The link between divine healing and turning back to God can be found in various books in the Hebrew Bible.

Confessing your sins, which were seen as a form of sickness, to your faith community and praying for one another in the community was a form of healing; it encouraged reconciliation and forgiveness, and it helped maintain a healthy community. As James said, it was powerful and effective.

He closes his letter abruptly by reminding us that we are called to be shepherds as Jesus was our shepherd. Bringing back a wandering sinner will save you both.

Getting back to Mark, he includes the enigmatic line, "For everyone will be salted with fire." The Bible scholar Eugene Boring noted that the meaning of this phrase "was already obscure to Matthew and Luke," who simply omitted it.¹ Matthew says instead that "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). There is a line in Leviticus that says, "Every sacrifice will be salted with fire" (2:13). Close but not the same.

There are many connotations here – purification, preservation, judgement, covenant – that make it possible to explain the saying in many ways, but the fact is this saying defies easy explanation. If it helps, salt is the only rock we eat.

Some of the non-churchgoers I know have asked me if Hell is real. Their next question is usually, “Am I going there?” As their de facto pastor in the moment, I have to say ‘yes’ to the first question and ‘no’ to the second.

Gehenna is the Greek word for the Valley of Hinnom, which runs along the southern border of the Old City in Jerusalem, less than 1000 yards from the southeastern corner of the Temple wall. From Isaiah’s time up to the first century, a portion of the valley was used as a garbage dump² and you could see the fires burning at night. Those were the unquenchable fires referred to by Jesus.

The fires were real; in this reading, they symbolize separation from God, but Jesus did not mean it literally when he said we might end up there, and he certainly didn’t mean it would be forever. He merely meant for us to pay attention to the least members of society, to lift them up and care for them, and to not impede their path.

Trouble in the world: There are many interesting headstones in the Hingham Cemetery, one of which is a huge millstone. No idea why the owner chose it to mark his final resting place. He could have been a miller, or maybe it made for an inexpensive headstone, or maybe his family was playing a joke on him after it was too late for him to get back at them.

It’s all too easy to lose hope when you work and work for something but eventually realize that all of your work has made no difference at all. That’s when salt loses its flavor. Maybe that’s how you end up with a millstone marking your grave.

It’s frustrating when we keep bumping into stumbling stones, especially those we put there ourselves in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Jesus pointed out that it would be our own hands and feet and eyes that would cause us to stumble, but if we do it to others, we’re in trouble, morally and spiritually.

How can we tell if someone is for us? He does kindness to you in Christ’s name.

How can we tell if someone is against us? He injures the innocent.

Grace in the world: Jesus puts demands on us, in our prayer life and in our ministries. He has a sense of urgency too, now that he has turned his face toward Jerusalem. He wants us to choose. What do we really want, and what are we willing to lose to get it?

We are called to help build the kingdom here on earth – it’s not on us as individuals to finish the job but we are called to help do the work and to build on it. There are ways for us to do this without cornering the market on doing deeds of power. Every church has their favorite ministries. Some overlap with other churches, and some are unique. We’re called to do something, even if it’s just one thing, and to bear the name of Christ in all that we do.

The last words of Jesus in this passage, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” mean to leave the desire for rank and privilege, the rivalries and ungodly ways, to others.

Jesus invites us to change our behaviors and our attitudes. He uses harsh hyperbole to shock us and make us aware, because this is serious business. He also taught us to help and support one another, to lift each other up, for *everyone* will be salted with fire.

Salt adds flavor, and fire purifies. Salt is a preservative and was often used to symbolize the enduring nature of covenants between people (Leviticus 2:13a). According to ancient practices, when you shared salt, you shared fellowship, and fellowship brings reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace.

Amen.

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¹ Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: a Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006), 284.

² Not to mention unsanctioned human sacrifices. See 2 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 7:31, and Isaiah 66:24.