

10.04.2015—Dante part 1

Overview: *Losing the path in a savage forest*

Today we begin a 5 week sermon series on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in the original Italian the *Divina Commedia*.

And you may be asking, "Why? Why Fr. Jim? Why spend the next 5 sermons talking about some 695 year old Italian poem? Sure, it may be a classic of world literature, but we're not here for some college seminar."

"And besides," you might add, "Dante's *Divine Comedy* contains quite a bit about other matters, especially 13th and 14th Century Italian politics. It has a huge cast of characters, many of whom were obscure Italians from that ancient time period. And on top of that, its worldview is heavily influenced by Medieval and Early Renaissance thought, and is not the same as our worldview."

If you're thinking those things, I'll say to you, "You're right." Those considerations are all true.

Nevertheless, I will also say that there are still many important spiritual lessons that *The Divine Comedy* can teach us. And I believe using 5 sermons to consider it will be time that will be spiritually well spent. So here we go.

To begin with, I want to spend a couple of moments mentioning what *The Divine Comedy* is and what it is not.

First, some things it is.

It is an Italian poem completed in the year 1320. It is set 20 years earlier during Holy Week and Easter of 1300. The author, Dante Alighieri, is also the main character. In the poem, Dante is making an trip, a pilgrimage through what was considered to be the spiritual world of his day. Most people, myself included, would consider this an imaginary trip, not a real vision. In this trip, the poem is subdivided into 3 parts to talk about the 3 areas Dante visits: *Inferno*, or Hell; *Purgatorio*, or Purgatory; and *Paradiso*, or Heaven.

During this trip, Dante is accompanied by 3 guides. First, the pagan Roman poet Virgil. Next, a dead woman whom

Dante had loved from afar named Beatrice. And finally St. Bernard. That's St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian Monk and Mystic, not St. Bernard the big shaggy dog.

As Dante travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, he is seeing the sights and meeting people whom he recognizes by name or personally in each area. But more importantly, and probably the most important reason for looking at *The Divine Comedy* is that Dante is also making a journey of spiritual self-discovery. And I'll have a lot more to say about that as we go.

Finally, a brief word about the title. Dante originally called the poem *Commedia*, the *Comedy*. Remember what a comedy originally was. Not a bunch of jokes or something funny. Rather a comedy had a happy ending. Its opposite was tragedy, which would end tragically. So this poem is certainly a comedy in that original sense. As Dante travels and grows and learns, he does experience a happy ending, perhaps the happiest of all possible happy endings. More on that in a few weeks.

But as people read *The Comedy*, they gave it an additional nickname. Because it did have heavy spiritual themes, they attached the word "Divine." And that nickname has stuck.

OK. Those are all things about what *The Divine Comedy* is. How about what it is not. Primarily, most importantly what *The Divine Comedy* is not, is authoritative.

It contains quite a bit of Medieval theology set into an artistic poem. It contains quite a bit of authoritative scripture set into an artistic poem. But it doesn't replace or override scripture. Scripture will trump the poem every time. And, yes, *The Divine Comedy* is a brilliant theological and spiritual reflection on sin, human nature, and spiritual growth. But it is also limited by it's Medieval / Early Renaissance worldview.

Now, how can we possibly look at such an extensive work in 5 sermons? There are entire semester-long courses offered on *The Divine Comedy*. Well, in a real sense, we can't. But we can look at some selected high points. And I especially want to focus in on episodes

and themes that are of great spiritual value for us as 21st century Christians.

One of the great themes stretching over all 3 parts of *The Divine Comedy* is the theme of dealing with human factions and divisions. In our hyper-polarized age, this theme is of extreme importance to us spiritually. We'll be returning to this theme in future sermons.

But for now, let me mention that factions and divisions are dealt with in very different ways in the 3 areas Dante visits. In Hell, human factions are alive and well, and often exacerbated. In Purgatory, folks in different factions begin to pull together and work together. But in Paradise, there is a wonderful sense of union between people whose politics or theology or personalities had been different on earth. *The Divine Comedy* shows great hope of healing of the divisions we face on earth.

And this is no light matter for Dante. Dante was in exile from his native Florence at the time his journey supposedly was set. And he was still in exile 20 years later when he finished this poem. And he died in exile never to return. Centuries later, the citizens of Florence sought to repatriate the remains of their most famous author. But his body is still buried in Ravenna, and has not yet returned from exile.

The exile Dante experiences crops up in many different ways in *The Divine Comedy*. We won't go into the details of Florentine politics in 1300. Basically there were two warring factions, one of whom was eventually triumphant. And then that winning faction split in two, and Dante found himself on the losing side in that division. He was forced to leave his hometown, never to return.

And so that pain of exile, that longing to find home is a huge theme throughout the poem, and we'll see it mentioned in various ways again and again.

And the genius of Dante is not that he just explores his own pain about earthly politics and earthly exile. But he also uses that earthly exile as a springboard to describe our

human condition, the spiritual journey we are all on. In a real way, we have been exiled, and we long to return home. In biblical terms, we have been banished from the earthly paradise, and yet we long to be part of God's heavenly paradise, to be reunited with him, to finally come to our spiritual home. And that's where the story begins, and that's where I want to turn to the first 2 sections or Cantos of the poem.

The Divine Comedy is basically 100 cantos in length, and divided roughly into thirds. But the first two cantos of the first part, *The Inferno*, function as something of a prologue or introduction to all of the poem.

In Canto I, Dante begins with these words: "When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray."¹

What Dante is experiencing is a mid-life crisis writ large. He is halfway through his life, and he is lost. We know that he was in exile. But he finds himself spiritually lost as well. In fact, we will learn that he is in a deep spiritual malaise. Dante describes it as being in the midst of a dark forest; he has completely lost the path he was on.

He continues: "I cannot say how I had entered the wood; I was so full of sleep just at the point where I abandoned the true path."²

He is spiritually lost, yet he does not know how he has become lost. He finds himself in darkness. But he's been on autopilot in life and doesn't even know how he has arrived at the place where he is. It's a strong reminder that we can't just go through life blindly. We must seek to stay on the path, for if we don't, we may find, like Dante, that we're off track and lost. Following God has to be a conscious choice.

What has not yet been revealed to us is the fact that Dante is in this dark forest on Good Friday, the annual remembrance of the crucifixion, the spiritually darkest and saddest day of the year. Over the course of the poem Dante will eventually make it to Easter and

¹ Mandelbaum translation, Canto I.1ff

² Ibid, Canto I.10ff

eventually will experience God's presence. But for now, he's lost and in darkness.

In the dark forest, he eventually makes his way to a clearing with a hill, and he can see the sun above the hill. He wants to climb the hill, to climb towards the light. Then from the high vantage point of the hill he can hope to get his bearings and find the path out. So he begins to climb. But his way is blocked by a leopard, a lion, and a wolf. These animals probably stand for the powers of sin which prevent Dante from reaching the light. So Dante's own sin keeps him stuck in the dark forest with no discernable way to escape.

It's a reminder that we can't save ourselves. Salvation has to come from someone else reaching into our lives, seeking us out, and finding us.

Fortunately for Dante, this is the case. St. Mary observes his difficulty. She sends St. Lucy, whose name is related to the word for light, to help him. Lucy speaks to Dante's dead love, Beatrice, who is now in Paradise. And Beatrice seeks the help of the ancient Roman poet Virgil, Dante's strongest artistic hero and role model. Virgil comes to Dante, and offers to help guide him, at least through Hell and Purgatory. Virgil as a pre-Christian pagan can't accompany him through Paradise. But he can go the first two thirds of the three part journey.

And so the two poets, Dante and Virgil, set out on a different path. Dante still can't climb the hill and reach the sun directly. He's going to have to travel first through Hell, through the Inferno.

There's wonderful paradox here. To ascend, Dante will first have to descend. To reach the joys of heaven, he must first come face to face with the power of sin. He will have to go from the dark forest through the deeper darkness of Hell before he finds the light of Heaven again.

We'll leave Dante there this week, seeking to escape the dark forest. But the good news is that he has been sent help. Heavenly forces have interceded for him. While he's going to have a tough journey, he is going to also have help from above. By himself he is

lost and will remain lost. But with heaven's help, and by following the guide that heaven has sent, Dante will find new life and will reach the light. May the same be said of us.

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10.11.2015—Dante part 2

Inferno 1: *Divine justice and love, human excuses and refusal*

Today is the 2nd of a 5 part sermon series looking at Dante Alighieri's classic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. This week and next week we'll be looking at the first part of that poem, *Inferno*.

Of the 3 parts of the poem, *Inferno* may be the most familiar. Chances are, if you've only read one part of the poem in school, *Inferno* is probably the part you read.

There's even a video game called *Dante's Inferno*. The game takes great liberties with the poem. They try to replicate the geography of Hell. But they recast Dante not as a poet on a pilgrimage, but as a knight on a quest, wielding his sword and wreaking havoc as he travels the 9 circles of Hell.

But the fact that such a game exists does tell us something about the original poem of the *Inferno*. Of the 3 parts, *Inferno's* setting is most like our modern video games, or science fiction or horror movies. There are gruesome scenes in the poem that if they were filmed accurately they would get a hard "R" or maybe even an "NC17" rating for violence and gore and disturbing images.

Which leads us to one of the key theological and spiritual questions that the *Inferno* raises. What kind of God would create such a place of horror and/or allow it to exist? This is a question we as readers have to wrestle with. It's also a question Dante wrestles with in the poem. Is God some sort of bully? Is God some sort of sadist? Or is there something else going on here?

A clue comes at the gateway to Hell.

At the beginning of the 3rd section, Canto III, Dante, accompanied by his guide, the poet Virgil, approaches the threshold of Hell. And there over the entryway is an inscription: "THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE SUFFERING CITY, THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE ETERNAL PAIN, THROUGH ME THE WAY THAT RUNS AMONG THE LOST. JUSTICE URGED ON MY HIGH (CREATOR); MY MAKER WAS DIVINE AUTHORITY, THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE. BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS WERE MADE, AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY. ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE."³

We often focus on the last line: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." But we miss the other heavy message of the inscription. The gate of Hell says that it was God's sense of justice that urged its creation. It was made by God's own authority, and the highest wisdom, and primal love, love from the beginning.

God's justice and love. It might be a little easier to understand Hell as a place of justice. We see things in the world and we often say, "That's not right." Even small children will say things like, "That's not fair." We may not see everything as God might see them. But we do have a sense when things are wrong. And when people maliciously choose to do wrong things we want to see them punished. So at that level we can see Hell as a place of Justice.

But what about love? Is Hell a loving place? We might ask, how can this possibly be so? How could Hell be God's loving creation? Dante himself asks this.

But the answer is simple. God loves us enough to allow us free will. God loves us enough to let us make choices in life. And if we choose to reject God, to turn our back on God, God will not force us to live in his eternal presence. Out of love, God will let us make the choice to live without God. And God will provide a place in the spiritual universe where we can live outside his immediate presence.

In Dante's *Inferno*, Hell is the farthest point from God's presence. It is the place from the beginning that God has set aside to allow people a space to choose to live without him. And it is created out of Divine Wisdom, and Justice, and Love.

What might be harder for us to link with Divine Love are the punishments that go on in *Inferno*. Some of them are quite gruesome.

Dante has set up 9 circles in an inverted cone. And the deeper you go, the worse the sin being punished and the more severe the punishment. There are a couple of introductory levels. First, there is a Vestibule for those who haven't made any choices in life. They haven't chosen sides between God and Satan. And so they are rejected by both Heaven and Hell.

Then the First Circle in Hell is Limbo for virtuous pagans, like Virgil, who lived good lives but were not in relationship with God.

But then Circles 2 through 9 are subdivided into 3 general areas. First is sins of incontinence. We use this word more narrowly these days to indicate lack of control in excretion. But incontinence originally meant a lack of control in any area of life. Those who are guilty of incontinence are not malicious. They're just out of control. More on that in a moment.

Second is a grouping of those who have committed malicious sins of Violence. And third is a grouping of who have committed malicious sins of Fraud, including sins of Betrayal. We'll say more about Violence and Fraud next week.

But as we see these sins being punished in *Inferno*, it's sometimes hard not to feel sympathetic to those being punished. The pilgrim Dante begins that way himself. But as he goes deeper and deeper and sees the corrupting effects of sin on people's lives, he becomes less and less sympathetic. Even as he sees more gruesome punishments, he sees them as the natural consequences and punishment of sin.

³ Mandelbaum translation, Canto III.1 ff

And this is probably one of the hardest parts for 21st century Christians. We could get off on some tangents here that we don't have time for this morning. I'll just file by title that even with VERY conservative Evangelical and Fundamentalist theologians there is currently a debate about the meaning of the biblical image of the second death. There is a school even amongst these most conservative of scholars that is suggesting that punishment of sin will not be eternal, and that God in his mercy will allow those who reject him to die and cease their existence. That's something we really don't have time to discuss further.

But if you're asking me personally, I much prefer C.S. Lewis's picture of Hell.⁴ With C.S. Lewis, living separately from God in Hell is punishment enough. You don't have to pile on additional punishments. But this sermon series is not about C.S. Lewis nor is it about Jim Haney's preferences. It is about Dante's worldview and what we might be able to learn from it.

And Dante has a wonderful spiritual insight in his descriptions of the punishments of sin in circles 2 through 9. The punishments are not so much punishments as they are consequences.

Modern parenting theory suggests that the response to bad behavior is not arbitrary punishment, but rather letting children experience the natural consequences of their bad behavior. This is actually the exact way Dante has things set up in *Inferno*. The punishment fits the crime. As one Dante scholar says, "Since hell is... separation from God, punishment is not something inflicted by God, but the consequence, indeed the enactment, of the sin itself."⁵

For example, in the 8th Circle⁶ are those who have sewn discord and schism. These are those in the Body of Christ, the Church, who have caused grievous wounds to

the unity of the body, who have caused division. And so in that circle, their own bodies are divided up in gruesome and graphic ways.

And it's important to note that it's not just that the sinners who are being punished in *Hell* are there only because they committed these particular sins. As we learn later in *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, there are those in these parts who have committed EXACTLY the same sins as those being punished in *Inferno*. The difference is, these others have repented of their sins, and asked for God's forgiveness, asked to be restored to relationship with God.

Which leaves us time for one quick case study of one particular resident of *Inferno*. In Canto V, we meet Francesca. In Dante's day, everyone knew the scandalous story of Francesca and her lover Paolo, who also happened to be her brother-in-law.

Francesca's husband and Paolo's brother caught them *in flagrante delicto*, and in a jealous rage he killed them both.

You may have seen a famous statue of Francesca and Paolo and not known it was them. Rodin's sculpture, *The Kiss*, shows the two of them locked in a passionate embrace.

Dante meets Francesca along with Paolo in Circle 2, the circle of the Lustful, one of the sins of incontinence, of being out of control. In life they were swept along by their passions. In *Inferno*, they are blown around and around like leaves in a stormy wind.

Francesca addresses Dante by calling him "O living being."⁷ In Italian, the word is *animal*, animal, a being with life, but without the human attributes of intellect or will. This is a Freudian slip for Francesca, for she has rejected any sense that her intellect or will can override her passions. She has in a real sense, rejected her humanity, and thus she doesn't recognize Dante's humanity.

Back when the poets first entered Hell, Virgil had told Dante that the people within had given up or foregone the "good of intellect."⁸ This is certainly true of Francesca.

⁴ see C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

⁵ Teodolina Barolini, *Medieval Multiculturalism and Dante's Theology of Hell*

⁶ Canto XXVIII

⁷ Canto V.88

⁸ Canto III.18

She claims that she is there because she and Paolo had be seized and led by love. It wasn't a choice. They had no control. Love forced them into an adulterous relationship.

She then goes on to describe the circumstances. One day while she and Paolo were alone, they began to read the story of Sir Lancelot, who was overcome by love for Guinevere. And that reading "forced" them to begin a physical relationship themselves. It's kind of the modern equivalent of saying, 'We got in bed together, we started watching a racy erotic movie together, and then, somehow, circumstances were just beyond our control.'

Fundamentally, Francesca denies she has done anything wrong. And she denies that she had any power over love. She was just swept away. Never mind that she and Paolo put themselves into a position where they could be easily tempted. Never mind that there were several places could have applied the brakes and chose not to.

No, she denies she's done any wrong. She blames love. Then she blames the story of Lancelot. Then she blames the author of the story of Lancelot. At no point does she see that she has had any choice or culpability herself. And thus she is totally unrepentant, for she doesn't see that she has anything to repent of.

"God is love,"⁹ scripture says. But for Francesca and Paolo, love has become their god. Their lustful love has become an idol, something that have put in the place of God. And while there are the lustful in both *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, including the great St. Augustine, those in *Inferno* are unrepentant. For St. Augustine in his writings, the important thing was turning his will away from himself and towards God. For Francesca, she turns her will away from God and towards herself. And as a consequence, she and Paolo are blown around out of control, just as they were out of control in life.

For now, we'll leave Dante in Hell and spend one more week with him there next time. But we will see him turning more and

more away from his own sin as he witnesses the sin of others. And consequently, he will turn more and more toward God. And eventually he will see God himself. But we'll save that for another time.

For now, let us be aware of our own sinfulness. But let us also be aware of the wondrous Love of God, and the forgiveness he brings to all who seek him. As scripture says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, (God) who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."¹⁰

Thanks be to God for his mercy and his love.

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10.18.2015—Dante part 3

Inferno 2: The depths of corruption

We come to the 3rd week of our 5 week look at Dante's *Divine Comedy*. And we come to our 2nd week of looking at Dante's experiences visiting *Inferno*, or Hell.

Last week I wrestled with the issue of how Dante could portray a loving God punishing sin in some pretty graphic ways in *Inferno*. I suggested that it wasn't so much about God punishing sin as it was about God allowing people the freedom to experience the logical consequences of their behavior.

Plus I also mentioned that there were other people in both *Purgatory* and *Paradise* who had committed the same sins as people in *Inferno*. The main difference was that those in *Inferno* refused to acknowledge their sin and ask for God's mercy. In other words, God's grace and forgiveness were available, but they refused it. We'll come back to that theme a little later.

I mentioned last week a couple of Dante's creative consequences of sin. In the 8th Circle of Hell, those who had created division and schism in the church now experience

⁹ 1John 4:8, 16

¹⁰ 1John 1:8-9

division in their own bodies. In the 2nd Circle, those who have let themselves get swept away by their own lust are now swept away by constant winds, blowing around like dry leaves in storm.

And there are few other examples I'd like to touch on.

In the 4th Circle are two groups who were pitted against each other in life, both of whom mistreat money. In Christian stewardship, God gives money to us to be used for his glory, as well as to take care of our needs and the needs of our families. But in the 4th Circle are the prodigal or the spendthrift, those who waste money recklessly. Surprisingly there are also the hoarders, the miserly, those who are so tight with their money that they don't use it appropriately. And the two groups are in constant antagonism. They roll these big rocks around and try to crash them into members of the other group. As they strike each other the two groups call out, "Why do you hoard?" and "Why do you squander?"¹¹ They are in mutual antagonism for all eternity.

And the sad irony is, there's nothing left for them to fight over. Money as a means of exchange is an earthly commodity. There is no money in Hell. And yet their mutual enmity remains in their hearts long after the reason for their differences has passed.

In the 5th Circle are those who are angry mired in a slimy, swampy, muddy river. Some of the angry lash out, striking each other, as Dante says, "Not with hands alone, but with their heads and chests and with their feet, and tore each other piecemeal with their teeth."¹² And in that same angry river are those who have internalized their anger, choked it down, let it consume them and drive all the joy from their lives. They are underneath the muddy slime, perpetually choking on their anger for all eternity.

Another disturbing river is found in the 7th Circle, the circle of the violent. They are in a river of boiling blood, since they were

steeped in bloodshed during their lives. And the more violent they were, the deeper the part of the river of blood that they must stand in.

I mentioned last week that Dante divided Hell into 3 general areas based on worsening degrees of sin. At the upper levels are sins of incontinence, sins that center around a lack of control. Then there are the violent. And then there are the fraudulent.

One question that may come to mind is why does Dante see fraud and betrayal as worse sins than violence? The answer comes in the way Dante thinks of sin. He portrays sin in varying ways as a rejection of the gifts that human beings have been given by God.

What are the chief gifts Dante is thinking about? They crop up again and again: intellect, and will. It is our intelligence, our ability to make choices that separate us from the animals.

Those in the upper levels who lack self control are not using their intelligence nor their will to resist forces outside themselves. They are just swept along by these other forces: lust, greed anger.

Next are the violent. They have rejected their human gifts in another way. They choose to lash out like animals. They choose the path of tooth and claw and bloodshed.

But the deepest levels of Hell are for the fraudulent and the betrayers. These are people who have taken the good gifts of intelligence and will that they have been given. They in turn use these gifts maliciously. They use good gifts for evil purposes. Thus Dante sees them as the worst of the sinners in Hell.

In the 8th Circle are a number of different groups of the fraudulent. There are thieves who are continually attacked by serpents. The serpents meld their forms with the forms of the thieves. The thieves have stolen from them the last thing they possess, which is their appearance.

In another part of the 8th Circle there are those who tried to use sorcery or fortune telling to see into the future, which is known only to God. They now have their heads reversed so they can only look behind them and

¹¹ Mandelbaum translation, Canto VII.30

¹² Ibid, Canto VI.112f

can't see where they're going, and their eyes are full of tears. They tried to see clearly into the future. Now they can only see dimly where they have been.

But the worst of the worst are in the 9th Circle. Dante reserves this circle for the worst of the fraudulent, those who betray others. They are frozen at various depths into a sheet of ice. And probably the most shocking encounter comes with a pair of betrayers named Ugolino and Ruggieri. Ugolino is there because he betrayed others, including members of Ruggieri's faction. And Ruggieri is there because he betrayed Ugolino. They are frozen in ice up to their necks. And fact Ugolino is getting eternal revenge on Ruggieri by engaging in cannibalism, by chewing on his head perpetually.

Remember that I've said before that Dante lived in a time of great divisiveness, great factionalism. And Ugolino and Ruggieri each represent different factions. And one of the underlying questions, is, how bad can factionalism get? And Dante is showing us that the answer is, "It can be eternally horrible and destructive." And it can cause collateral damage.

In life, Ruggieri had locked Ugolino and his 4 children in a tower with no food. They nailed the door shut. Poignantly, as they all were starving to death, the children invited their father to save himself by feeding on their own flesh. The 4 children die first. And Ugolino is left in the cell with their corpses. Eventually, he gives into his hunger. In his chilling words, "Then hunger proved more powerful than grief."¹³ And he eats the bodies of his children. And now, in the 9th Circle of Hell, Ugolino exacts revenge by eating his enemy, Ruggieri.

What is especially tragic is that Ugolino, like every other soul in Hell, had the opportunity to turn to God, but refused. And there were even signs given that he ignored. A ray of light appeared in the cell, but it did not remind him of God. He looked at the reflection

of his own guilty face in his children's innocent eyes, but it did not lead to repentance. His innocent children offered him their own flesh to eat, but it did not lead him to turn in faith to the Innocent Lord who offered his own body and blood to bring us eternal life. Instead, Ugolino chose perpetual revenge over redemption. A tragic choice indeed.

At the center of the frozen plain, Dante encounters Satan himself, trapped in ice from the waist down. Satan, who was once the most beautiful of the Archangels, Satan who was once closest to God is now hideous, and is now as far away from God as he could be. In Dante's geo-centric universe, the center of the earth was the point that was farthest from God's heaven, and there Satan was trapped. Satan had led a rebellion in heaven against God, and he was cast down to the depths of the earth.

Satan is portrayed as a grotesque parody of the Holy Trinity. He has three faces, and in his three mouths he is perpetually chewing those whom Dante regards as the greatest sinners and betrayers: Judas who betrayed Jesus, and Cassius and Brutus who betrayed Dante's hero Julius Caesar. Interestingly though, Satan, the greatest source of evil, is also impotent to do anything to Dante.

In fact, there is a little hole in the ice that's holding Satan. Dante follows Virgil in climbing down Satan's hairy flanks. And as they're climbing down, there is a reversal in gravity as they pass through the center of the earth, and they begin to climb up Satan's legs.

It turns out, as Satan was cast down, the earth left a hole because dirt and rock wanted to avoid Satan. In fact it formed a mountain on the other side of the world, the mountain of Purgatory. And Dante and Virgil are able to climb up this hole, this shaft, all the way back to the surface.

Dante began in a dark forest on Good Friday. Now it is early Easter morning, and he emerges and sees the beauty of heaven above him, and the stars shining in the heavens.

As I said two weeks ago, to ascend, Dante first had to descend. To journey toward the joys of heaven, he first had come face to

¹³ Canto XXXIII.75

face with the power of sin. He had to go from the dark forest through the deeper darkness of Hell before he finds the light of Heaven again.

Dante has seen the effects of Sin. He has seen the suffering caused by Sin and by a refusal to acknowledge or repent of Sin. He also has found that evil has no power over him if he trusts in God and seeks God's light.

Two more stages of his journey await him, but he has already made great progress. Fortunately for him, even greater things lie in store. On Easter morning he is experiencing new life and resurrection. And he will continue his journey until he sees God light face to face.

Let us continue our journeys, trusting in the love and light and forgiveness of our most gracious and awesome God.

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10.25.2015—Dante part 4

Purgatorio: The seven story mountain

In this 4th week of our 5 part sermon series on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, we come to the most theologically problematic section for Protestant Christians: Purgatory.

In Medieval Christian Europe, the idea of Purgatory arose as a supposed intermediate state between Heaven and Hell. Unlike those in Hell, the souls in Purgatory would eventually reach the joys of Heaven. But first they had to do penance, they had to be purged of their earthly sins.

300 years after Dante, the Protestant movement would reject any idea of Purgatory on the grounds that it is not found in Scripture. Our own tradition said it this way in the year 1563: "(The doctrine of Purgatory) is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."¹⁴

In more 21st century language we might translate it, '(The doctrine of Purgatory) is

a futile thing, foolishly conceived, and grounded on no evidence of Scripture.'

That's a pretty strong rejection of the idea of Purgatory. And it wasn't just rejected on the basis of Scripture. There were also concerns that the whole idea of Purgatory put too much emphasis on human actions, and not enough on God's grace. If Jesus' cross was God's answer to sin, if the death of the Lamb of God really did take away the sins of the whole world, then why did the souls of the departed need to spend time working off their sins? The Protestant answer was and is, they didn't. It's about God's grace, it's about what God does for us, not what we do for ourselves.

So today as we walk with Dante through his conception of the spiritual universe after death, what do we do with the middle third of *The Divine Comedy*. How do we deal with *Purgatorio*, Purgatory?

We could skip it. Or we could look at it dispassionately, simply as an expression of pre-Reformation Medieval theology.

But I think there is something VERY valuable about this section of Dante's poem. And I believe the value lies in looking at *Purgatorio* as a model, not for the life to come, but for the Christian life now. There are helpful spiritual insights in this section for modern Christians, even those who reject the notion of Purgatory itself.

So this morning I'm going address ways I believe this section is helpful to us. But first, just a bit about the structure, about the story.

When we last saw Dante, he was climbing out of Hell. Originally he had been lost, he had strayed from his path in a dark forest. He tried to climb to the light but was prevented from doing so. So he was shown a different path. To ascend, he would first have to descend. Before he found the joys of Heaven, he would first have to grapple with the forces of sin in Hell. And as he journeyed through Hell he was also on a journey of self-discovery, recognizing the affects that his own sin had on his life.

¹⁴ Article XXII, *BCP* p. 872

But at the end of *Inferno*, he begins a climb up out of the depths and again finds himself able to see the stars above him. He finds himself on the shores of the mount of Purgatory as the dawn of Easter is beginning to break upon him. He has traveled through darkness and death and sin. Now, he is beginning... beginning to experience new life.

As Dante approaches the mount of Purgatory, he says, "We made our way across the lonely plain, like one returning to a lost pathway."¹⁵ In a very real sense, Dante who had lost the path of his life is now back on track in his journey towards God.

Geographically Dante sees Purgatory as a mountain on an island out in the middle of what we would call the Pacific Ocean. It is exactly the opposite side of the world from Jerusalem. And remember the symbolism of Dante's geocentric geography. If God is in the Heavens, then Hell, in the depths of the earth, is the point farthest from God's presence. Conversely, as you ascend the mount of Purgatory, the higher you go, the nearer you draw to God's presence. Basically, when you get to the top of Purgatory, you have arrived at the highest point on earth, the closest you can get to God on earth.

Toward the bottom of the Mountain are a couple of holding areas for those who repented very late in life, or those who were negligent or indifferent in disciplines of worship, those who were preoccupied with other matters. All of these souls will eventually make it to heaven, but for now they have to wait. That's the huge difference between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. These souls in Purgatory will all reach heaven. But first, they have to deal with spiritual matters they did not deal with in life.

The bulk of the mountain is made up of seven layers, or seven terraces. This is the famous seven story mountain. Each of these terraces is about dealing with one of the seven deadly sins. They are, in ascending order, pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust.

You may remember that there were souls in Hell guilty of these same sins, experiencing the consequences of their choices. But in Purgatory, these repentant souls who will eventually be with God in Heaven are trying to work through these sins, to find cleansing. And there is a similar pattern on all seven terraces.

First of all, on the wall of the mountain are large carvings, which appear almost lifelike, of scenes from scripture and classical literature. They portray the virtue that is the opposite of the sin each terrace is concerned with. For example, on the first terrace there are scenes of humility to counteract the effects of the sin of pride.

Also, the souls on this ledge carry large stones on their shoulders that weigh them down. In life, in their pride, they held their heads too high. Now they are learning to be bowed down in an attitude of humility.

This pattern continues on other terraces. Those who are envious have their eyes sewn shut. In life they had looked upon what others had and coveted those things. But now they spend time without looking at anything at all.

Those who were angry spend time in a smoky cloud, learning to seek God's direction rather than being driven by their own rage.

Interestingly, on the fifth terrace, we see a mixed group dealing with sins of greed. Just as in Hell, there are two groups together here, those who expressed their greed by hoarding their possessions, and those who wasted their possessions. In Hell, these two groups would clash with each other, try to crush each other with large rocks. But in Purgatory, they engage in prayer and worship together. They cooperate with each other instead of fighting each other.

And that prayer and worship are not incidental. Worship is a huge theme in *Purgatorio*, as it will be also in *Paradiso*. In Purgatory, the souls arrive on the shores of the island singing Psalm 114, "When Israel came out of Egypt..." And as they ascend the mountain they sing other Psalms and songs. Every time one soul ascends from Purgatory to

¹⁵ Mandelbaum translation, Canto I.118f

Heaven, the mountain quakes in joy, and every soul on the mountain gives thanks to God by singing "Glory to God in the highest." At every level of Purgatory, God is worshipped. In Hell, the souls were fixed on themselves and had turned away from God. In Purgatory, the souls are seeking God and praising God.

This is one of the great spiritual lessons of *Purgatorio*. Sin causes us to be self centered. One of the great antidotes to sin is to shift our focus from our selves to God. And prayer and worship are a huge part of the spiritual disciplines that help us turn towards God. What we do on Sundays together, and what we do during the week with our own prayer time are vitally important to our spiritual health.

In fact, you might summarize *Purgatorio* as being about the necessity of re-ordering our priorities, re-ordering our inclinations and our affections. Sin is all about our affection for things or for ourselves. It is about our desire for things other than God. It is about our own idolatry, putting various things in the place of God. To find spiritual growth, we have to reject our desire for other things, and increase our desire for God.

This is a difference between Christianity and other forms of religion, say Buddhism for example. I'm not an expert in Buddhism. But as I understand it one of the chief problems in Buddhism is dealing with desire. And the Buddhist path is to seek to tame desire and eventually to extinguish desire.

By contrast, the Christian response is to re-direct desire to its proper object, namely God. All of our sin is, at heart, an expression of misdirected desire. We're putting something in the place of God. Spiritual growth is about returning God to the proper place he should have in our lives. As St. Augustine famously said, we all have a God shaped hole in our lives that we try to fill with other things. But only God can truly satisfy our deepest desires.

So on the seven story mountain, souls who are heading toward God are trying to regain the proper perspective they should have had all along. They are trying to reject their

own sin. They are trying to deal with the shadows in their lives even as they climb toward the light of God.

We too must be aware of the shadows in our lives, the sin in our lives, the misdirected desires that we have. And an important part of our Christian journey is about grappling with these desires, and learning to re-direct them toward the only thing that can truly satisfy us, namely God himself.

In *Purgatorio*, Dante travels up the seven story mountain as he climbs towards God. Dante wrestles with his own sin and goes through his own act of penitence. At the top of the mountain, Dante finally arrives at the earthly Paradise, the restored Eden, the state God intended for us to live in from the beginning. He sees an elaborate presentation of salvation history. And he meets up with Beatrice, whom he loved from afar, and who will guide him as he journeys from the earthly Paradise into God's heavenly Paradise. But we'll save that piece for next week.

In the meantime, we have the opportunity every day to seek to grow spiritually, to seek to align our lives more and more to God's will, to seek to turn our desires to him. Of course, we can't do this on our own. We stand in need of God's help. We stand in need of God's grace.

But Jesus promises that those who seek him will find him. So let us live the words of Psalm 27: "You speak in my heart and say, 'Seek my face.' Your face, Lord, will I seek."

Your face, Lord, will I seek.

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11.01.2015—Dante part 5

Paradiso: The blessed saints and the eternal light of God

Today, on All Saints Day, we come to the last of our 5 weeks of sermons on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. And we arrive at the 3rd and final section of his poem, *Paradiso*, or Paradise, or Heaven. And here on All Saints Day, we

appropriately gather with the blessed saints and angels who are enjoying the light of God's very presence.

I was listening to a couple of professors from NYU who team teach a course on the *Divine Comedy*. They not only have taught it at NYU. They've also done the class for a group of prisoners at Attica maximum security prison, as well as doing it for a group of Cistercian monks at a local monastery. They commented that their undergrads most enjoyed *Inferno* with all of its gory spectacle. The prisoners most resonated with *Purgatorio*, for they too were trying to work through the consequences of their actions and find redemption. But they said the monks most liked *Paradiso* with its vision of the blessed saints enjoying the light of God's eternal presence.

If you read through *Paradiso*, one of the most striking and recurrent images is the image of light.

Dante began his journey in a dark forest. He was unable to climb towards the sun. So he began a descent through even darker depths of Hell.

Then on the mount of Purgatory, he was able to climb towards the light. But on that mountain, Dante was only able to move, to climb during the day. Each night he had to rest and wait.

But in Heaven, the light, God's eternal light, is always present. The saints often appear as points of light. The angels are also luminous beings. And God himself appears as a light. In fact, God is a triply bright light, a Trinitarian light, brighter than all other lights.

Dante has trouble as he ascends in the heavens with dealing with increasing degrees of light. At various levels he finds the light overwhelming, and he has to wait for his eyes to adapt to increasing light as he is drawn upwards towards God.

And this is one of the other great themes of *Paradiso*. Dante has been purged of his sin in Purgatory. And now, without sin weighing him down, he is subject to a different type of gravity, a spiritual gravity that draws

him upward toward God instead of downward towards the earth.

As Dante ascends he will pass through various celestial layers or spheres, each named for a different heavenly body. Remember, in his time, the Earth was thought to be the center of the universe, and was thought to be surrounded by different celestial spheres. First the Moon, then Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, then the Stars, and finally the outer sphere that moved all the rest of the spheres.

And as Dante travels through these layers, he meets different saints. The saints aren't really located in these spheres--they're all together in the Empyrean, the highest heaven, the Heaven above the heavens. But God allows them to meet Dante in a way that he can better perceive with his senses, in various layers of the physical heavens, layers which roughly correspond with certain attributes of each of the saints.

And one of the striking things is the souls Dante meets in the first three heavenly circles. Because the first 3 circles of the heavens, the Moon, Mercury, and Venus, were between the Earth and the Sun, they were thought to be less perfect, because Earth's shadow would move across them.

And the souls of the saints that Dante meets in these first three circles are less than perfect themselves. They had struggles in life. They didn't always make the right choices. And yet, they are still enjoying God's presence, they are basking in his light forever.

It's a great reminder that saints are never perfect. Some have led more exemplary lives than others. But all are fallible and flawed human beings. Yet God has a prepared place for them and for all of us in his heavenly kingdom. It's not about how wonderful any of us are. It's about how wonderful God is.

And again, these imperfect saints are not living in these imperfect circles--they're simply meeting Dante there. They are part of the great number in the Heaven above the heavens, they are part of God's heavenly dance.

And Dante does portray heaven as being all about movement. Not random movement, but purposeful intricate movement like a dance. Or complex harmonic interactions like music. This sets it apart from Hell and Purgatory.

In Hell, there was very little movement. Souls were stuck in various circles just as they had been mired and stuck in their own sinfulness.

In Purgatory there was some movement. There was freedom to move. But the movement was slow and ponderous, souls moving up from one level to the next.

But now in Heaven there is great freedom to move in God's intricate dance and to share in his light, to play a part in his movement and his music, to take one's place amongst God's people. It's a wonderful, glorious vision. A vision of perfect beauty, and joy, and love, and peace.

One of my favorite scenes in *Paradiso* takes place in the circle of the Sun. Remember, Dante had been trying to reach the Sun back in the beginning of *Inferno*. Now he has arrived, and he will eventually climb even higher. The light of the Sun is just a small emanation of the greater light of God that he will eventually see.

But in the circle of the Sun, Dante meets some of the great teachers of the faith. And there's an absolutely wonderful thing that happens in Canto 11 and 12.

Remember in Hell there was conflict and strife. I had mentioned before that Dante was in exile at the time he wrote *The Divine Comedy*. He was in exile because of the strife and the struggle between various factions in Italy.

And in Hell that strife was alive and well. In one of the most chilling scenes in the 9th circle, one member of one faction was perpetually feeding on the head of another, locked in a disgusting cannibalistic embrace of conflict for all eternity.

I also mentioned that in Purgatory, some of the same types of folks who were opponents on Earth and in Hell were starting to

work together and support each other and engage in worship together.

But in the Circle of the Sun this dynamic is carried even farther. We meet two of the greatest medieval theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure. What's remarkable is that these two theologians were part of different religious orders. Aquinas was a Dominican, Bonaventure a Franciscan. What is not readily apparent to us is that in the Middle Ages there was quite a bit of rivalry and factionalism between these two orders. It was sad that two monastic order that should have both been focusing more on serving God spent much of their energy competing with each other.

But in Heaven, Aquinas the Dominican gives a great speech praising St. Francis and the gifts he brought to the church. He also laments the failings of his own Dominican order.

And conversely, Bonaventure the Franciscan praises St. Dominic and his gifts to Christianity, while lamenting the failings of his fellow Franciscans.

There is an amazing sense in this interchange that old divisions and old rivalries are not only forgotten, but that they have been subsumed in a very real and a very deep and holy love. For those of us who live in a world of competition and factions and strife, it is perhaps one of the greatest rays of hope in all of *The Divine Comedy*.

And this wonderful heavenly union and love finds it's highest expression in the final few Cantos of *Paradiso*.

Dante has a vision of the Empyrean, the Heaven above the heavens. All of the faithful departed, all of the saints are gathered together praising God. Dante describes this level poetically as "the heaven of pure light, light of the intellect, light filled with love, love of true good, love filled with happiness, a happiness surpassing every sweetness."¹⁶

It's an amazingly full description. Perfect light. Perfect intellectual enlightenment. Perfect love and good and supreme happiness.

¹⁶ Mandelbaum translation, Canto XXX.40ff

Dante portrays the ranks upon ranks of the blessed in Heaven gathered in vast throngs, arranged in large arrays, like huge amphitheaters thousands of rows high and wider than the Sun. And there are huge numbers of these structures, arranged like petals in a rose. A countless throng. And there are innumerable angels flying about between the petals of this rose singing praises to God. And God appears as that triply bright light shining upon them all.

In response to this glorious vision, Dante the great wordsmith says that his words fail him in describing it accurately. He says his best words are weaker than the babbling sounds of an infant.

But God's light is so wonderful and perfect he says "it would be impossible for (anyone who has seen it) to set that light aside for another sight."¹⁷ And that is the great spiritual message of *The Divine Comedy*.

In *Inferno*, lost souls were lost precisely because they had either rejected God's light, or because they had put something else, something far smaller, far lesser than God in God's place. Their desire was for something that could never satisfy.

In *Purgatorio*, souls were learning to change their focus, to forsake lesser desires and replace them with a desire for God.

And now in *Paradiso*, Dante says that anyone who has seen God's light would never be able to substitute anything else for it again. He makes that point again in the final lines of the poem:

"My desire and love were moved already--like a wheel revolving uniformly--by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."¹⁸

Dante began by being lost, by being completely off the path. He found the path again. And the path led him to God's presence. Now, he says, that his will, his desire and love, have become so attuned with God's music, have become so enlightened by God's light, that his

life is now moved totally by the same force of Love that moves everything else in the universe.

That is our goal--to open our eyes more and more to behold God's light, and to conform our lives more and more to doing God's will.

Jesus taught us to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Dante teaches us to seek to do God's will so completely, to be so in tune with God, that no other force moves us or animates us. If you could see God, Dante is telling us, you'd never settle for anything else.

Compared to God, everything else fades away. Nothing is as important as God. Nothing can satisfy us except God.

May we join with saints and angels in praising God perfectly. May we behold his glory, forever.

¹⁷ Mandelbaum translation, Canto XXXIII.101f

¹⁸ Mandelbaum translation, Canto XXXIII.143ff