**Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aiken, South Carolina**

09-28-25

Luke 16:19-31

What is heaven like? What is hell like? I don’t know. The Scriptures don’t give us a particularly detailed description of either place, but we do get glimpses here and there.

From the Scriptures I know, as you do, that heaven is more wonderful than we can possibly imagine; and that hell is more horrifying than we can possibly imagine.

One thing is for certain; the Scriptures are clear about the fact that heaven and hell are two very real, very different, places. The Scriptures are also clear as to who may be assured of spending eternity in heaven, and who shall suffer the eternal terrors of hell.

Today’s gospel text is one of those accounts where we get a glimpse behind the veil that separates the temporal from the eternal.

Before we assume that Jesus’ account of the rich man and Lazarus is only a story that he used to illustrate a point, consider the fact that, unlike Jesus’ parables, two of the persons are called by name; the patriarch Abraham, and a beggar, whose name is Lazarus.

The only other person in the story remains nameless; he is only known as “the rich man.” Could there have been people who heard the story, and knew of this beggar, and of the rich man, at whose very gate the beggar died in misery? I don’t know.

We do know that whatever Jesus speaks can only be true, and so, what we have here is a glimpse of life after death; a glimpse of heaven, and a glimpse of hell.

We often wonder what exactly happens when we die. Jesus’ account leaves no question about the fact that, when our time here is done, our eternity is only just beginning. The soul that death has separated from its body is immediately present in its forever place; either in heaven, or in hell.

The soul removed from this mortal world immediately receives its eternal reward; the eternal peace and comfort of paradise, or the terrors of eternal damnation. There is no other option.

There is no so-called purgatory, where we go to work off our unpaid sin; Jesus Christ crucified has fully paid your debt; your sins are forgiven.

There is no divine, afterlife lounge, where we just hang around, waiting for Judgment Day. Just as we see in Jesus’ account of Lazarus, and the rich man, the souls of the faithful who die before Jesus’ return are received immediately into heaven, and the souls of those who die in unbelief are received immediately into hell.

Nor do the souls of the dead return to this realm; there’s no such thing as ghosts. However, there are deceiving spirits about, doing anything that they can, to draw people away from the Christian faith, even portraying themselves as the souls of the departed.

It’s just one more of Satan’s lies. But always remember; he and the other deceiving spirits, the demons, have already been defeated by Jesus Christ; and no one, and nothing, can snatch you out of Christ’s hand. So, don’t be lured away by the devil’s deceptions.

Jesus’ account in our gospel text is clear about the fact that the dead do not, in any way, shape or form, return here. In fact, the rich man actually begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers about the reality of hell; and what does Abraham tell him; *‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’*

We are not to look for, and get caught up in, signs and wonders to confirm the reality of eternity, or of God, or the truth of his word. The one, true and living God has already revealed everything necessary for our salvation in his divinely inspired, inerrant word; the Holy Scriptures.

As with the rich man’s five brothers, so also with us; we have Moses and the prophets. We also have the apostles and evangelists; the writers of the New Testament.

The One whom Moses and the prophets proclaimed would come, the Christ, has come. He has completed his work upon the earth for us. Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, the Christ.

He has redeemed mankind through his perfectly sinless life, his perfectly innocent suffering, and the perfect atonement of his sacrificial death upon the cross. Moses, the prophets, the apostles, and the evangelists all point to Jesus, and so, we are called to hear them.

Because faith comes from hearing, and hearing only by the word of God. It has always been this way regarding our salvation. Lazarus the beggar heard and believed; the rich man heard, and did not.

What the people knew about the rich man and about Lazarus was only what they could see. Lazarus a poor beggar, homeless, diseased, dying. The rich man possessing everything his heart desired, living in excess without a care in the world.

Jesus mentions that the rich man was clothed in purple. That color, in the Roman world, often identified an official of some sort; someone who possessed authority.

This makes it even more likely that this rich man was known by name to the people; but in Jesus’ account, he remains nameless.

This confirms another reality regarding eternity; that the Lord knows those who are his, and he calls them by name. But, as for those who do not acknowledge Jesus here, in this life, he does not know them in eternity.

Many in that Day shall cry out ‘Lord, Lord,” and he shall say “I never knew you.” We know Lazarus, this man of faith, by name; but the rich man’s name has been eternally erased.

We give thanks to God that he has given us more than enough information about that which we do not yet see, that we are clearly warned about the coming judgment, and comforted with the promise that the Lord does not, for even a moment, abandon anyone whose faith is in him.

Even now, he sends his angels to minister to us, in ways that we are not even aware, and our gospel text indicates that the Lord’s angels continue to minister to us after we die, as Jesus states regarding Lazarus; *22The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side.*

Heaven and hell are two very real, very different places. While nobody can provide a detailed description of either one, God, through the Scriptures, gives us little sneak peeks, both to warn us, and to comfort us.

The Scriptures tell us plainly that, at death, the believer’s soul is immediately in heaven, present with the Lord, but the soul of the unbeliever is immediately in hell, unacknowledged by the Lord.

It is our heavenly Father’s desire that nobody would suffer such a horrible fate, but that all would repent and believe, and be saved from hell, and it is through his word that the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in one’s heart.

That word has gone out, and will continue to go out, to all the world until Jesus’ return. Let us, then, continue to pray that many more souls would hear and believe, and be saved, even as we continue to feed upon that same word, and remain steadfast in this faith. Amen.