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Theological Observer

Homiletics

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ARCHIVES

He Descended into Hell

(A mystery play about victory over death)

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EDITOR'S NOTE: ALTHOUGH DRAMA IS NOT A REGULAR FEATURE OF THIS JOURNAL, several of our staff associates urged the printing of this play because of its merit. The author is pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Elma, Iowa.

CHARACTERS:

NOAH

2 ANTEDILUVIAN SCOFFERS

DEATH

SATAN

LILITH, Satan's wife

CHRIST

DISMAS, the thief who repented
on the cross

I. NOAH AND THE SCOFFERS

NOAH: My name is Noah. Shipbuilding's not my trade, but I can't get anyone to help make my ark. Today is the Sabbath, and as usual nobody is keeping it. Nobody except me and my family. We were the only ones at the services today, and I'm the preacher!

1st SCOFFER: Noah, do you know you're a great tourist attraction? People come from thousands of miles away to get a look at the crazy prophet making an ark in the middle of the desert. It's good for business in Mesopotamia.

NOAH: That is the only way religion interests you — when it's good for business!

1st SCOFFER: Don't preach to me! I am as good a man as you are. Only I don't have to pray or erect an expensive ark to show it.

NOAH: This ark requires a great deal of expense and labor. If you were a good man, you would help us.

2d SCOFFER: It's a waste of time.

NOAH: God will send a great flood upon the earth to punish man for his sins.

1st SCOFFER: That's nonsense. Science is against it. The Wise Men at the school in the Land of Nod have shown that a flood is impossible in this desert.

NOAH: The wisdom of this world will be washed away in the waters of the flood. Repent, and flee from God's wrath! Join us before it's too late!

2d SCOFFER: Why should we fear the wrath of God? God is not narrow-minded, if there is a God, and He will not deny us our little pleasures — which you call sins.

NOAH: Little pleasures! Murder, rape, crooked justice, violence in the streets, faithlessness, fraud —

1st SCOFFER: Each has his own motives. Who are you to judge?

NOAH: Listen, you scoffers! Ever since man fell into sin, death has been God's judgment upon sin. But God promised salvation when He said to the snaky Tempter: "I will put enmity between you

and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed, and He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise His heel." Cleanse your hearts and put your hope in Him!

1st SCOFFER: Oh, no one believes that old story any more.

2d SCOFFER: And who needs this Seed of the woman? We can solve our own problems. We are giants in the earth.

NOAH: Repent, or perish!

1st SCOFFER: You too will perish, Noah. Death comes to all.

(The Scoffers exit.)

NOAH(*kneeling*): Almighty King, I have devoted my life to building this ark in obedience to You. But though I escape from this flood, I shall not escape death. Is death the end for all who build arks for You? Yet I will put my trust in You, O Savior and Lord.

II. AT THE GATE OF HADES¹

(Death, leaning on his scythe near the Gate, stands staring at Noah, praying on his knees.² The Scoffers watch from their prison.)

¹ The Old Testament parable about men of God delivered from captivity behind the gates of death, Ps. 107:8-19, was understood by many in the ancient church to be descriptive of Christ's descent into hell and was reflected in the ecclesiastical tradition that the departed faithful of the Old Testament were imprisoned in a limbo (i. e., a border) of hell until Christ's resurrection. St. Augustine's considered opinion was that the *Limbus Patrum* story might be true, but "the authority of the canonical Scriptures cannot be brought forward as speaking expressly in its support." ("Letter CLXIV," *Nicene Fathers*, VI, p. 517)

² The personification of death appears in the older versions of the story of the descent into hell (*The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *The Gospel of Bartholomew*, *The Book of the Resurrec-*

DEATH: What fool is this, that prays even in this place? Hey, old man, don't you know where you are? This is Hades, the bottom of the universe, the world of the dead and the damned, the home of devils. God will not hear you here.

NOAH (*rising*): Be quiet, Death! God is in the midst of His people, even here,³ and He will deliver us from your power.

DEATH: Bah! How shall you escape? The walls of my city are strong and guarded by demons.

NOAH: You have no right to keep God-fearing people captive.

DEATH: No right? The Almighty Himself has given me power over all who transgress His laws. The wages of sin is death. Even the angels who sinned are prisoners in my underground city. Do you think that human beings shall escape? They all come to me in the end. I am the real Master of the universe.

NOAH: Why, you're nothing but a swaying pile of bones!

DEATH: I may not look strong, and perhaps my face is not glowing with youthful vigor. But what can hold a man down more tightly than illness? And what grips a man more firmly than the infirmities of the deathbed? What is stronger than weakness? And what is more deadly than death?

NOAH: I almost think that you enjoy your work of destruction.

DEATH: I enjoy nothing. Joy, hope, laughter—those are only dreams and de-

tion of the Dead), but not in the medieval Yorkshire, Wakefield, and Chester mystery plays depicting it.

³ Cf. Ps. 139:8.

lusions that do not show life truly. There is nothing at the end for men except Death and Hell. But all men are fools. Why do they laugh? Why do they think that they have a right to be merry? Why do they boast and think well of themselves? They are only rotten sinners who spurn their Maker and grieve Him all the days of their life. Yet they want to laugh and be merry, when they should be mourning and thinking of the consequences of their sins. They all deserve nothing but death.⁴

NOAH: But some of us are righteous.

DEATH: Hah! Righteous, if one does not look too closely. As for you, I shall never forget you — the sailing preacher, the pious pilot of the flood, lying drunken in your tent. You righteous ones fall like the rest of mankind. You all wallow in iniquity. So I spread sickness everywhere, like seed in a field and go everywhere with my sting (*swings scythe*). I mow them all down — righteous, unrighteous, young, old, rich, poor — I don't discriminate. What right have any of them to cry for mercy?

NOAH: O gloomy Death, who has made you the judge of men?

DEATH: I am not the judge. I am the executioner and the jailer.

NOAH: Have you no pity?

DEATH: Pity is a sickness of the mind. I hate all people. (*SATAN enters.*) I hate him, too. He prattles about his schemes for revolution and thinks that he is the

Lord of Hell.⁵ But it's all pride and conceit. The devils are no better than human beings. (*To Satan.*) Hail, Satan, Prince of Hell! But where is that black-hearted wife of yours — Lilith, who snatches babies from their mothers and breaks up families?⁶

LILITH (*enters*): Hold your tongue, you old reptile. Satan, darling, why do you keep that old ghoul on your staff here?

SATAN: We need him to destroy the works of God and bring men down to Hell. Our work would suffer without him.

LILITH: It suffers anyway. If you were getting anywhere in the world, you could provide some better home for me than this stinking hole in the bottom of the universe. Who wants to live in this heat?

SATAN: Don't complain. You know that we are rulers in Hell and can go to earth when we like.

LILITH: Yes, but I hate always having to get permission from an angel before we can cross the border of Hell. There is no way to get across without one of them seeing it, and making us state the purpose of our visit to earth, and how long we intend

⁵ *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (*The Lost Books of the Bible* [Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1926], pp. 64—91) calls Satan "the prince and captain of death" (15:1) and "keeper of the infernal regions" (18:9), and Death "the prince of hell" (15:1). This ambiguity of title and authority is never cleared up, but the descending Christ subjects Satan to Death's dominion (18:14).

⁶ Lilith: the devil's wife in Jewish folklore, not mentioned in the church's stories of the descent into hell. The superstitious used charms and lullabies to protect infants from her malice; a popular etymology derives the word "lullaby" from her name.

⁴ In *The Gospel of Nicodemus* Death asserts that he holds all the dead in prison because of unbelief and sins (15:20), that they are held captive by original sins (17:7). Similarly in the Wakefield mystery play Satan argues with Christ over whether it is right to release any of the dead from hell.

to stay, and all that.⁷ Why, one of them — it was that military angel with the red mustache —

SATAN: Michael. He took over my place as Commander-in-Chief of the Heavenly Host.

LILITH: He made me tell him that I was on my way to make life miserable for a certain old lady, and he denied me permission, because the old lady was a widow who had given her last mites to the Lord, and could not have borne the temptations I was going to bring on her.⁸ O, it makes me furious to think of it! (*She screams, gnashes her teeth, and stamps her feet*). The Tyrant in Heaven controls and polices us and denies us our rights! And it's all your fault. We could still be living in luxury in Heaven if it were not for your stupid plots of revolution. You thought that you could get power, you could rule the universe. But now where are we?

SATAN: Quiet, you witch, and I will tell you of my plan for getting us out of here. Look here, see the countless multitudes already in our prisons. Over there are those that died in the flood — ah, that was a great victory for Death and me!

LILITH: They are all dripping wet.

SATAN: They have been dripping for 2,300 years and more. They remain as they were at the time of death, and are as hardened in their unbelief and hatred of

⁷ According to *The Gospel of Bartholomew* (M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953], pp. 167 ff.) the movements of the devils are restrained and controlled by celestial angels, and "when any spirit of us would go forth either by land or by sea, these angels send forth fiery stones and set our limbs on fire." (2:45)

⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 10:13.

God as then. I am going to take advantage of that, Lilith. When we have enough, I am going to gather an army of dead men and demons and go to war against the Almighty. I will force Him to give us our freedom and restore us to our former place of glory. What do you think of that?

LILITH: Another stupid scheme! But what about all these prisoners just inside the gate of Hades, who died in faith and have never submitted to your rule here? They ignore us, and pray and sing all the time. If you were not afraid of their God, you would push them into the prisons of the Pit. (*A light shines upon Noah.*) What's this? A light? These prisoners are not permitted to have a light! Make them snuff it out! Go on, Satan, show them that you are Lord of Hell!

SATAN: You there, turn out that light, and get down into the Pit, where you belong!

NOAH: You have no power over us, Satan. You are holding us here illegally. As for this light, it comes from outside of Hell, and we believe that it is a signal of our Lord Jesus, who is coming to deliver us. It is a light of hope shining upon us who sit in darkness and in the shadow of Death. He is the Seed of the woman who will crush you and swallow up Death.

SATAN: Hah! Your hope has already come to nothing. (*To Lilith:*) Listen now, you grumbling shrew, and you shall hear the rest of my brilliant plan. This Jesus of Nazareth was thought to be the Savior. But I stirred up the people to crucify Him. Death has already put his chains upon Him, and He is in our power.

1st SCOFFER: Do you hear that, Noah?

Do you see your faith going up in smoke? Now you will have to come into the prisons with the rest of us, and admit that it is better to suffer nobly in Hell than to cling to the promises of a deceiving God!

NOAH: Even though my heart be broken by the threats of Hell or by the ridicule of the unbelieving world, I will never give up my faith in Christ!

SATAN: Enough of this! Come, Death, bring out this Christ, that we may mock Him. Where do you have Him in chains?

DEATH: I don't have Him in chains.

SATAN: What? Where is He? If you —

DEATH: Be still, and I will tell you my tale. I went to the tomb of this Jesus and fastened the chains of Death on Him. But all of a sudden the corpse sat up, broke His chains, and laughed at me, so that I fled in terror. When I returned to the tomb, He was gone.⁹

SATAN: You coward! You blundering fool! You have let Him escape!

DEATH: No, it is you who are the fool. It is you who brought Jesus to His death, so that now He wanders in the world of death free and unchained, and will come here to us to destroy us and take away our power. I am afraid of Him, for this is the Almighty Himself in human flesh.

SATAN: Why these sudden fears, Death? Jesus is a mere man. Did I not see Him suffer? Did I not see Him die? And do not all dead men belong to you?

DEATH: The dead belong to me because of their sin. But you, you bragging blockhead, you have killed a man that never

sinned. We shall all pay for this! Listen! I hear Him coming already. The soil of Hell trembles under His footstep. (*He unlocks the gate and looks out.*) Yes, He comes, He comes! Since all of this has come about because of your brilliant plans, you had better gather your demons and go forth to defend the Gate of Hades against Him!¹⁰

SATAN: He is only a mortal —

DEATH (*swinging his scythe and forcing the devils out through the gate*): I said, Go forth! Go! Go! Go! (*He stands for a long time, watching as the army of devils passes through the gateway.*) There are legions of devils now, spread out over the Valley of the Shadow of Death, waiting for Him. I would pray for their success, if I worshiped any power higher than myself.

III. CHRIST'S TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO HELL

DEATH (*looking out through the gate*): Satan has lost the battle. Christ has taken the devils captive and is coming this way to make an open show of them. (*He locks the gate.*)

*Christ marches toward the Gate of Hades, with Dismas bringing the devils in chains and bearing a victory banner. Christ knocks, is refused admission, strikes it some mighty blows with His cross, enters Hell, and embraces Noah.*¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (16:1-3) and *The Book of the Resurrection of the Dead* for the accounts of Death casting out Satan and of a military battle between Christ and the devils in hell.

¹¹ "Thus there are already passages in the New Testament which presuppose or at least suggest a descent into hell by Christ. Some of these suggest a purely passive stay of the Lord in hades (Matt. 12:40; Acts 2:24, 27, 31; Rom.

⁹ This story is told in *The Book of the Resurrection of the Dead*.

CHRIST: Rejoice, My people, for I have come to set you free and bring you to Paradise!¹²

10:7; Eph. 4:8 f.). Others presuppose an active operation of Christ in hades; and already the beginnings of the three main types of ecclesiastical conception of the Descent occur: conquest of the powers of hell (Rev. 1:18, etc.); emancipation of some or all the dead (Matt. 27:51-53); proclamation to some or all of those found in the world of the dead (1 Peter 3:19; 4:6)" (B. Reicke, "Höllenfahrt Christi," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed., III, 409). We have incorporated all these elements into our mystery play, without undertaking the task of determining which elements should be interpreted literally and which figuratively. That task is better left to theologians and exegetes than to playwrights and storytellers. St. Augustine's opinion was that nearly every detail of the church tradition of the Descent should be subjected to figurative interpretation, except the irreducible fact that Christ overcame the infernal powers of death ("Letter CLXIV," *Nicene Fathers*, VI, 519). Luther's view, endorsed by the Formula of Concord, Art. IX, was expressed in his Easter sermon at Torgau on April 13, 1533: "Many pictures painted on walls portray how Christ descends, comes to hell with a *Chorkappe* and a banner in His hand, and there with strikes and drives away the devil, storms hell, and leads His people out, as is also portrayed in plays for children on Easter Eve. . . . I believe that Christ Himself personally destroyed hell and bound the devils; it is for God to know whether the banner, gates, doors, and chains were wooden, iron, or whether there were such things at all. That does not matter to me, if only I maintain that such pictures indicate what I should believe about Christ. The main point, benefit, and power for us is that neither hell nor devils can imprison or harm me or any who believe in Him." (*Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. J. G. Walch [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1885], X, cols. 1126 & 1130)

¹² Whether 1 Peter 4:6 refers to an emancipation proclamation to dead patriarchs, as many of the church fathers thought; or to a "Hades Gospel" offering salvation to the damned (Origen, Marcion), or to an earthly evangelization of the "spiritually dead" (Augustine, Luther)

SATAN: No! I will not let them go!

CHRIST: Hush, Satan! I have redeemed them from your power by My holy precious blood and My innocent suffering and death.¹³ Dismas, My friend, put these jailers in their own jail. Your reign is crumbling, Satan, and all who trust in Me shall put you to shame. As for you, Lilith, who have tormented so many children, the smallest child who believes in Me shall overcome you and all Hell.

are much disputed points. Cf. *The Lutheran Commentary* on this passage for a Lutheran version of the Limbus Patrum tradition. Saint Augustine firmly rejected the theory of a "Hades Gospel": "If this were true, we should seem to have no reason for mourning over those who have departed from the body without that grace, and there would be no ground for being solicitous and using urgent exhortation that men should accept the grace of God before they die, lest they should be punished with eternal death" ("Letter CLXIV," *Nicene Fathers*, VI, 520). One group of interpreters understands 1 Peter 4:6 to refer to "the dead who lived during the whole period of the New Testament since the Gospel had been preached through the apostles after Christ's ascension into heaven." (Bengel's *Gnomon*)

¹³ The patristic tradition expressed in the various accounts of the descent into hell portrays Christ entering hell not to suffer or to submit to the power of death, but to triumphantly apply the benefits of His death. In the Wakefield mystery play Christ says: "In anguish, pain, and bitter woe, I died on cross this day. Therefore to Hell now will I go to challenge what is mine; Adam and Eve and more to show that there they need no longer pine" (*The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, ed. Martial Rose [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1961], p. 446). In *The Gospel of Nicodemus* He declares: "Come to me, all ye my saints, who were created in my image, who were condemned by the tree of forbidden fruit, and by the devil and death; live now by the word of my cross; the devil, the prince of this world, is overcome, and death is conquered." (19:1-2)

IV. THE SERMON PREACHED TO THE
SPIRITS IN PRISON¹⁴

Death rushes forward, locks the Gate of Hades, turns, displays the Keys of Death and Hell in his hand, and defies Christ.

DEATH: You are still dead and still my prisoner. I will guard this gate forever, if need be, to keep you from returning to the land of the living.

1st SCOFFER: So this is the Savior in whom we were to put our trust!

2d SCOFFER: But this Savior cannot even save Himself from Death!

DISMAS: You fools, once I said the same thing to Him, when I hung on the cross next to Him. But then I saw that He was a King even in death and cried out in my dying breath, "Lord, remember me when You enter into Your kingdom," and He promised me: "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." I have already been there with Him, unworthy though I am, and will never mock at Him again.

1st SCOFFER: Is this a religion for thieves? Shall we trust the words of a convict?

CHRIST: There is no one too lowly to serve Me as a messenger. There have always been men like you, scoffers at God's will. Noah preached to you, and My Father and I pleaded with you, offering you forgiveness and life. How gladly I would

¹⁴ The sermon to the damned spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19-20) is not mentioned in the apocryphal or mystery versions of the Descent into Hell (except for a rebuke to Judas in *The Book of the Resurrection of the Dead*), nor yet in Luther's Torgau sermon on the Descent and other articles, to which the Formula of Concord (Art. IX) refers us.

have received you as a mother hen takes her chicks under her wing. But you scoffed. You have closed the Gates of Death and Hell upon your own souls. Scoffers have persecuted My people, and scoffers have put Me to death—Caiaphas, Pilate, and all the rest. But the world has not triumphed over Me, because I rose from the dead. You who fight against the Lord can never win. See, I plant My cross in Hell, and put My victory banner upon it, that you may be reminded throughout all eternity that I have overcome devil, death, and the world, and that you deserve your punishment.

Death fastens his chains upon Christ and shakes the Keys of Death and Hell in His face, while the Scoffers and the devils jeer. Suddenly Christ burst His chains, casts Himself upon Death, brings him to the ground, and pins him down with His cross. He triumphantly displays the Keys of Death and Hell to Noah and the saints.

DEATH: Will I now be swallowed up?

CHRIST: No, Death, I shall make you rise and serve Me against your will. You shall still strike My people, that they may remember their sins and draw near to Me. You shall be My errand boy to summon My servants into My presence. They shall hate and defy you, you filthy, stinking Grim Reaper, for you shall harvest My field, but I shall rob your bins on the Day of Resurrection. Now, open, you Gate of Hades, for you cannot hold Me or My people captive any longer. Come, Noah, come aboard the new ark which I have built. Come, my friends. Life and Paradise wait for you.

DISMAS: Where will You go now, Lord?

CHRIST: In a garden far away, I hear a beautiful lady weeping for Me and saying, "They have taken my Lord away." I will go to comfort her.



HYMNS FOR CONGREGATIONAL SINGING DURING THE PERFORMANCE (from *The Lutheran Hymnal*):

66:2	201:1, 4	217:1
190:4	204:2	223:3-4
192:2-6	209:2-3	218:2
195:1-2	210:1-4	253:3-4
198:1-4	211:3-5	

He Descended into Hell

(A pantomime)

I. IN THE TOMB OF CHRIST

Death approaches and fastens His chains to Christ. Suddenly Christ sits up, breaks His chains, and laughs, causing Death to tremble and flee.

II. AT THE GATE OF HADES

In the World of Death Noah and the other Old Testament believers kneel in prayer. Death returns with his broken chains. The devils enter, jeering and cursing the Scoffers in prison. A light appears. The Old Testament believers rejoice and draw the sign of a fish in the air, signifying Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior. The devils curse and stamp. Satan scolds the believers about the light, pointing threateningly toward the prison. The believers defy Satan, making the sign of the fish. Satan jeers, making the fish and then a cross, and pointing to Death. At this the Scoffers jeer at the believers, mocking the sign of the cross. But Death shakes his head, makes the fish, shows the broken chains, and points heavenward. Satan becomes angry with Death, and Death replies in anger, making a fish and a cross and pointing to Satan. Suddenly

Death stops to listen to a noise. He unlocks the gate, looks out, quakes with fear, and makes a fish, pointing through the gateway. The devils pooh-pooh his excitement, but he compels them with his scythe to go out with an army. He watches a long procession of demons going forth.

III. CHRIST'S TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO HELL

Death shuts and locks the gate, as Christ marches toward it, with Dismas bringing the devils in chains and bearing a victory banner. Christ knocks at the gate, is refused admission, strikes it some mighty blows with His cross, enters Hell, embraces the Old Testament believers, and commences to lead them out. Satan curses, stamps, gnashes his teeth, and tries to break loose from his chains. Christ commands Dismas to lock up the devils in the prison.

IV. THE SERMON PREACHED TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON

Death rushes forward, locks the Gate of Hades, displays the Keys of Death and Hell in his hand, and defies Christ. The

Scoffers now jeer and ridicule the fish and the cross. Dismas addresses them, making three crosses and pointing to one of them and to himself. He hangs his head in shame, beats his breast, and folds his hands in prayer to Christ. Finally, he points upward toward Paradise. The Scoffers scoff. Christ motions for them to be silent. He draws an ark on water and points to Noah. Then He points to the Scoffers and shakes His finger at them. He points to Heaven and to Himself, makes pleading gestures to the Scoffers, and squats and motions like the wings of a mother hen. He sighs and waves them away in despair, moves His fingers to imitate rain coming down, and shakes His finger at them. He points to Himself. Then He pretends to be one rending his clothes, and points to them.

He pretends to be one washing his hands in a basin, and points to them. He points to Himself, makes a cross, wipes it away, and shakes His finger at them. He plants His cross in Hell and hangs His banner. The Scoffers mock, as Death fastens his chains to Him and shakes the Keys of Death and Hell in His face. Suddenly Christ bursts His chains, casts Himself upon Death, brings him to the ground, and pins him down with His cross. He triumphantly displays the Keys of Death and Hell to the believers. He takes up Death's scythe, as if to plunge it into Death, but shakes His head, makes a cross over the scythe, and blesses it. He unlocks the Gate of Hades, draws an ark as He beckons to His people, and leads them out.

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