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THE HARROWING OF HELL A Medieval Mystery Play

- 1 During my last six years in ministry in Waterloo, I taught at what was then called Waterloo Lutheran Seminary (WLS). For me, it was the job of a lifetime! I loved it! I served as Dean of Keffer Chapel, as well, and when I retired, I was honoured as Emeritus Dean of the Chapel.
- 2 I taught such full semester courses as Christian Worship, Worship Leadership, Church Music, Church Architecture, and even Christian Spirituality. And in my last year at WLS, I taught a full semester course in Church Drama. The climax of the course, so to speak, was the presentation of the little drama I describe below, once in Keffer Chapel at WLS and once again in a local Lutheran Church, both during the pre-Easter season of Lent.
- 3 For more on such plays, refer to Essay 234, “The Baptism of Christ”. The play below, however, although only 20 minutes long, is a mini-spectacular, with a large cast and some serious production challenges. But I had both the cast and the energy in the WLS course I was teaching to mount it successfully. Here’s what it looked like.
- 4 The “harrowing of Hell” refers to the question, dear to the hearts of Medieval Christians, What was Jesus doing on Holy Saturday? That is, the day after his Good Friday crucifixion, and the day before his Easter Sunday Resurrection? Answer: He “descended into Hell” to preach the Gospel to those who had missed out on Jesus’ coming simply by an accident of time. And there he accomplishes Hell’s “harrowing” – that is, the plundering – the breaking down of Hell’s gates, the rescue of Hell’s prisoners to share with the living in the promised victory of the Cross. “Harrowing” is used here in its agricultural sense: to break down, to pulverize, to dissipate.
- 5 Christian art and imagery are full of portrayals of this event. Christ is pictured, standing erect and victorious, still in his grave clothes, carrying a white banner with a red cross, his bare feet standing on the fallen gates of Hell, with Hell’s former prisoners rejoicing in the background: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David the King, Simeon the prophet, John the Baptist. And a host of devils cowering in defeat at Jesus’ victory.
- 6 The SET: Standing to the right at the foot of the chancel is a twelve foot cross, with Easter’s empty white banner draped over its cross arms. At the foot of the cross is a blanket of fake green grass, given to us by the authorities from a cemetery’s gravesite; it obscures the cross’s standard. A plastic skull from Halloween lies at the foot of the cross – presumably Adam’s skull, in Medieval iconography. (Adam is also very much alive in this play: See paragraph 11 below.)

7 We determined early that we could not picture the gates of Hell as did Medieval dramatists, as a yawning, terrifying, multi-toothed monster mouth. But we did have a set of wooden gates, two of them, from a previous presentation of the “Play of Daniel” in the lions’ den. Each gate was four feet by eight, with frames of 2 x 4’s and long vertical bars of wooden dowels, the whole set painted black.

8 Since our play was to take the place of a sermon in a service of Holy Communion, we placed them out of sight, before and after our production, behind an imposing pulpit. For our play, actors representing Devils would simply carry them into position, where they’d be held upright in place by actors playing Adam and Eve. When the gates fell at Christ’s command, the devils would lower them to the floor on their backs, with much protesting and wailing and lamenting. At play’s end, we’d hide them again behind the pulpit.

9 The CAST and COSTUMES presented still another set of problems. Fortunately we had most of the needed personnel in the members of my class!

10 The Devils – three of them, plus a fourth, Satan himself – we clothed in black tights and turtlenecks, with bare feet. We cut long narrow strips of dark green plastic garbage bags and sewed their ends to actor’s sleeves, with a generous bunch of green strips tied to a neck band. We used the lion’s manes from “Daniel…” to cover the actors’ heads: a large frame of chicken wire, bigger than a basketball, fastened under the chin, with strips of fake fur tied into the wires. Each Devil sports a different Halloween half mask: a pig snout, a snarling cat, a gaping bear, a raptor’s beak. Each Devil wears black wool fingerless gloves. (We did not dare to costume our Devils as they would have in the Middle Ages, each with an enormous obscene dangling phallus!)

11 Adam and Eve? A handsome married couple in my class. We bought two identical white body fitting dancer’s leotards, neck to ankle and wrist, zipper down the back. We dyed them tan in tea-water. At their waist they each wear a macramé belt with green corduroy fig leaves, sewn by my wife. They are likewise barefoot. They hold the gates of Hell erect upon their entrance. But Eve carries also an apple, with two bites out of it!

12 Our script called for an Abraham. To honour the gender diversity of our class members – and to use the talent we had available! – we took the liberty of changing Abraham to Sarah, and dress her in a flowing white caftan, with white head piece. She carries a distaff: a twelve inch long branch of willow with three twigs, a loose ball of white polyester inside. With a drop spindle, ancient housewives would spin yarn from the loose wool.

13 Next: Moses. The actor here was an old friend, a contemporary of mine, with a short handsome white beard, a shock of white hair, and long experience in theatre. He wears a white alb under an authentic black and white striped African *bou-bou*, hand woven in Liberia of cotton strips sewed edge to edge to make a kind of caftan, presented to me personally years ago by a young Liberian student in Syracuse. A long nubby cotton prayer shawl, with voluptuous fringes, circles head and shoulders. He carries a pair of grey *Styrofoam* Tables of the Law, on which I had labouriously carved, with an *Exacto* knife, the precise words of the Ten Commandments, in Hebrew, for a previous Mystery play in Toronto. His bare feet are clad in sandals.

14 David the King: The actor portraying David is a tall, handsome Seminarian. We costumed him in a white alb, with dollar store brass “chain of office” around his shoulders, and a crown cut from a plastic bleach bottle, covered with foil, and studded with fake gems. Sandals. He carries an autoharp in his arms. I took great pride in providing each actor with a physical symbol that suggested their role.

15 Simeon the prophet: A white alb under an opulent red clergy cope, a red cotton skull cap with cheek flaps, his bare feet in sandals. He carries an (unlit) brass incense pot on a brass chain.

16 John the Baptist: We costumed him with the same Baptist's furs we had used in "The Baptism..." See Essay 234. This John, however, has a "bloody" rag tied around his neck, signifying his death by beheading by Herod at the request of Salome! He is barefoot, carrying the calm shell that is his symbol.

!7 Jesus in this play is a handsome ordained friend, a competitive long distance runner. He's costumed in his grave clothes: a minimum white drape at his loins, a long white swag over one shoulder, its end draped over his right forearm. He enters clutching a long banner pole supporting the banner of Resurrection: white with red cross, with two trailing tails, each tail ending in a small brass bell. He enters to the chords of Aaron Copland's triumphant "Fanfare for the Common Man", specially transcribed for organ for us, and played, by a talented WLU music student.

18 Michael the Archangel enters at Christ's summons at the play's beginning, carrying the Chapel's Paschal (Easter) Candle, to give the light of hope to Hell's prisoners. And he enters again at play's end with spear to drive the devils out of the play space. He's costumed in white alb, a gorgeous white damask velvet chasuble, and sandals. He sports four foot wings from his shoulders. See Essay 234.

19 The play's ACTION is simple. Three Devils comport in front of Hell's gates, mocking their prisoners within. At the sound of the organ's fanfare, Jesus enters and confronts them. They summon Satan, who engages Jesus in a long fruitless diatribe. (I took the liberty of condensing this speech significantly.)

20 Jesus banishes all four Devils as the gates of Hell fall to the floor. They retreat off stage, at the point of Michael's spear, wailing and lamenting. Adam and Eve and Hell's other prisoners step over the fallen gates, and walk into the Chapel's central aisle, where they turn to face Jesus. They kneel.

21 Jesus takes centre stage, facing actors and the entire gathered assembly. He blesses all (in a Trinitarian benediction!). And the play ends.

22 The play's reception was warm and appreciative. "Very inspiring!" was a comment I heard more than once. A member of the English faculty at WLU observed it was well done, and faithful to its origins.

23 My photo is a screen grab from an original VHS tape transferred to digital. It pictures the action early in the play. The empty cross stands at the right, with Adam's skull at its base. A sleeping Devil lies curled at Hell's gates. Winged Michael the Archangel enters down the Chapel's central aisle, bearing the Paschal Candle at Christ's command. Christ stands at the foot of the chancel steps, bearing his banner, right arm extended. Behind Hell's gates stand, left to right, John the Baptist with his bloodied neck and clamshell, Moses with his Tables of the Law, Simeon the prophet with his incense pot, Eve and Adam with fig leaf aprons and an apple, Sarah with distaff, and David the King with his crown and harp. Behind the altar table, the Chapel's East wall is enlivened with tiny tea candles in metal brackets affixed to protruding bricks.



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