“When Hell Froze Over

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Scriptures
Old Testament: Psalm 138:6-8 (NIV); New Testament: Matthew 10:16-23; and 28 (NIV)

Sermon
The low temperature in Fort Collins on December 9, 2025, was exactly 32 degrees Fahrenheit . . . or 0 degrees Centigrade, the temperature at which water freezes. It was apparently cold enough for the Health Department to act on probable cause. Now let me tell you a story.

There was a young, homeless man who like many others had received support and showers and meals and a few nights on the floor at the Mennonite Church. Following some unfortunate events, he overdosed on street drugs and died. He was known to have sown many wild oats and he found himself in Hell.

As it happens, Satan was aware of the Mennonites and decided to visit this guy. He walked into his room and there he sat in his boxers, sweat dripping down his face with an amazing smile on his face, reading a book.

Satan was puzzled. “Why in this place are you so happy?”

“Well,” the young man said, “It was getting really cold in Fort Collins and I am just so happy to be in where it’s warm.”

Satan left, thinking, “I need to do something about this. I’ll show him.”

So Satan turned down the thermostat for that cell block to well below freezing. He waited a day and then paid another visit. And there the guy was, sitting in the same place shivering his tail off and wrapped in a huge blanket. But he still had a beautiful smile on his face.

Satan was totally bewildered. “How can you possibly be happy now?”

“Well,” the young man said, “Hell froze over last night. Do you know what that means? It means the City of Fort Collins re-opened the Mennonite church to take in the homeless.”

I think that comes from an interview the other day when the press asked Pastor Steve if there was a chance the city would reverse its decision and allow us to move back in while we do the cleanup. Steve said, “Yeah. When Hell freezes over.” (Steve didn’t really say that, but I bet he thought it.)

One of my observations about our situation happens to be extreme gratitude. Over the past several years, we have accomplished so much. When I joined this group about six or seven years ago, I got in line to volunteer with the meals. Within another year we were feeding up to 100 people every Saturday night and then later, we were doing it again on Sunday morning with Pastor Leo and his folks. I stood in awe that this little Fellowship could be doing so much. This could have been Hell. But I looked around and everyone was smiling.

And when we had to file a state court lawsuit to get our lockers approved, I helped with one of those trips to Denver to gather up old lockers and haul them back to our church. And everyone was still smiling. We installed a tankless hot water heater so our guests wouldn’t have to take cold showers. The list goes on and on.

But even more powerful than the tangible services we provided was the statement we made to our guests and to our neighbors and to city officials – people matter. We have not failed, we have prevailed. We have been a beacon of hope and a witness for change.

In my scripture word study for today, I noted the Greek word for crisis, **Krisis**. It is not a direct translation as we know the word crisis in our cultural context. No, **Krisis** is different. It is defined as a critical event which demands decision. It is a time of reflection and opportunity for a turning point, an opportunity for renewal and change.

Let’s live up to our witness: change something. Yes, this is a time of crisis. But it is perhaps the most pivotal moment yet in our 50-year history. We are entering a time of reflection, renewal, revival and excitement. This is a defining moment: a moment not attached to location but to vision. It is a time, not to cower to adversity, but to lean into the trouble and receive the inspiration that only the Lord and Spirit can provide. It will be a cold day in Hell when this Mennonite Fellowship caves to a little persecution for its desire to be faithful to the end.

The Old Testament text today caught my really deep attention. David's Psalm in Chapter 138 is epic. David fully understands the power of faith set against the normal hardships of life.

> *The key word there is the Hebrew word,* ***tsarah****. It is seen often in the Bible and refers to trouble or distress or anguish. Here it is:*
> *v. 6 Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;*
> *though lofty, he sees them from afar.*
> *v. 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,*
> *you preserve my life.*
> *v. 8 The Lord will restore and revive me. Your love Lord, endures……*

In this text we are not told we will be delivered from trouble. That would be a completely different message. No, we walk in the midst of trouble. And in that walk we are restored.

The other Hebrew word used here is **chayah**, coming from the root word chi. It refers to being revived or restored to life. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you restore my life. Trouble is not a series of events to be avoided. Our assignment is to walk. Walk right into the middle of trouble. Lean into it if you need to. It is in that very walk that we are restored to life and purpose.

When I was in clinical practice I had a sign on my office door: "Please solve your problems in advance, so I can help you more." I approached the helping role with an assumption that the client's solutions already lay dormant within the heart and soul of that individual. It would likely not work well to try to introduce a solution from the outside that was not already consistent with the beliefs and resources inherent within.

That belief became the foundation of all my clinical work. If one is depressed, feel and experience the depression; own it, understand it, and embrace it. And one will nearly always find a clearing and a healing far better than avoidance or resistance. That was also the foundation of my work with suicide. My best intuition was to completely avoid trying to talk someone out of suicide by alternative cognitive suggestions. Rather, when the patient could fully embrace their own state of affairs and emotions, they became empowered to choose life over death. When we walk in the midst of our trouble, we will be restored. The natural force of the universe is to heal and restore.

Most of us know the actor and comedian Jim Carrey. I wish to read the short story he has told of his life.

> "For years, I lived in a van with my family…But in my mind, I was already a star." Because poverty can empty your pockets — but never your imagination. My dad was a musician who gave up his dream for a "safe" job. They fired him anyway. And just like that, everything collapsed. We lost our home…and ended up living in a Volkswagen van, parked in lots and open fields.
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> I was 15 and already knew what it meant to see my mom sick and my dad broken. Sometimes, all we had to survive the day… was laughter. I started working as a janitor at a factory, all the while dreaming of making the world laugh. The road was brutal. Audition after audition, they said I was "too weird." I battled anxiety and depression. But I kept writing, kept practicing in front of the mirror, kept believing.
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> One day, I wrote myself a fake check for $10 million and kept it in my wallet. A promise to myself. Years later, I got paid exactly that for the movie "Dumb and Dumber".
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> The hardest part? Losing my dad just as my dreams were coming true. He was my biggest fan — the one who drove me to every show when no one else would. But he left me with a lesson I'll carry forever: Don't give up on what you love just because you're scared to fail. Even the "safe" path can collapse beneath your feet.
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> Laughter saved me… But pain was my teacher. Because sometimes, the people who make us laugh the hardest…are the ones who've cried the most in silence." — Jim Carrey

Most of my preparation for this message had to do with perspective. Perspective is like a prism; the situation is best viewed from many angles. That creates new thinking. It can set the stage for radical departure from the norm.

Perspective: There was a young boy sent to his room for misbehavior. He was told to spend some time thinking about what he had done. After a while he came out of his room. He told his parents he had prayed and was better now. His mother was so pleased. She said, ”If you prayed to do better I am sure it will be answered.” He said, “I didn’t pray to do better. I prayed for your patience when I am upset.” There is always another perspective.

There is an old traditional story from India. The story tells of a young person who was complaining to his grandmother about the challenges he was facing in his school and job – difficult assignments, tough professors, a demanding boss, not enough time to relax, and always, a seeming shortage of funds.

The grandmother responded by placing three pots of water on the stove. When the water in each was boiling, she placed two potatoes in the first pot, two eggs in the second, and a scoop of tea leaves in the third. About twenty minutes later, she pulled out the potatoes and eggs and placed them on a plate, and strained the water out of the tea leaves into a cup, and placed them all in front of the young man. Puzzled, he looked up at her.

> “Touch the potatoes,” she said. “They’re soft,” he answered.
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> “Peel the egg,” she commanded. He did. “Drink the tea.” “It’s delicious, thank you,” he responded with a smile.
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> “But I’m still confused, Grandmama”, he said. “What was the point of all this?”
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> “The three pots of water were identical,” she answered. “But the potatoes, the eggs and the tea all responded to the same situation very differently. In hot water, the potatoes softened.
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> But in the same hot water, the fragile eggs hardened on the inside, and became stronger. The tea leaves however did something completely different – they actually changed the hot water and created something brand-new and better. So, which one are you grandson?” she continued. “When you are faced with adversity, are you the potato, or the egg, or the tea leaves? It is a choice that only you can make, and your choice will determine your outcome.”

This story created in my mind a potentially new perspective, a metaphor if you will. I have known some of the folks in this fellowship for over 50 years: Maurice, Mil and Ruth Penner, Steve Goering, Lowell and Barbara Jenkins, and others.

My new perspective could suggest that the first many years of the fellowship were like the potato in the hot water. The folks faced the challenges of formation, softening that comes with maturity and developing the closeness of faith and friends. The second several years faced the challenge of purpose and mission. The group made hard choices, became hard and strong like the eggs in the water. They bought buildings, started the craft sales ministry resulting in a Ten Thousand Villages store in Old Town, and eventually began serving the homeless community in the downtown location. We weren't considered hard-shell Baptists, but we served hard and long. We were tough.

My perspective emerges into a potentially new platform; a journey characterized by maturity and witness. We may turn out to completely change the water around us. Our insistence that homeless addicts matter could ultimately change the climate of understanding in the whole community. My message is not to promote; it is to open doors to potentially new and radical visions.

Matthew 10:28: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell.

So back to our earlier story of Hell. Satan decided to visit our homeless friend one more time. He went to his room. There he was in his shorts, sweat dripping from his brow. But he still held the same broad smile, seemingly at peace with his fate.

Satan again could not wrap his head around it. "Why and how can you remain so happy?"

The young man looked up at Satan, tears rolling down his cheeks, he said quietly, "I just knew that it would be a cold day in Hell when I finally got my own place."