

Our Sacred Story

A Sermon on the Gospel of Luke by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ November 20, 2022

This day marks the end of our church year. We have been coming to worship this year, seeking wisdom, seeking for God's love to be in the center of our lives. Most Sundays for the past year we have heard readings from the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of Jesus in a way that must have been shocking for many of the people who first heard it, with so many of the main characters being women, tax collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles, and poor people. Luke tells the story of Jesus in a way that is quite compelling for many of us.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we heard Mary's conversation with her cousin Elizabeth. *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.* In Luke's Gospel, we see that God's mission is shared by women, including by this young unmarried mother, by the disciples, and ultimately by us. In Luke's Gospel, we see there is a constant interactivity between God's will and human will. This is our sacred story.

In the second chapter of Luke, we heard the story of the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem. *And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* This is a complex, realistic story. God requires us to be authentically in relationship with God, to not do things for the appearance of seeming religious. In turn, God is fully present with us in our lives as we actually live, not as we would want to live. This is our sacred story.

In the fourth chapter, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth *as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him...and he found the place where it is written "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind."* In Luke's Gospel, we hear a continuing story, rooted in Hebrew scriptures, in which we are somewhere in the middle of the story. In Luke's Gospel, we see our journey with God is a shared journey with a great multitude of people who came before us, and many people who will come after us. This is our sacred story.

In the sixth chapter, we heard the Sermon on the Plain. *Jesus looked at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh...But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.* In Luke's Gospel we hear Jesus' fundamental concern for equity among all people. In Luke's Gospel we hear a story of hope for those who live in darkness. We hear a story of mercy for the poor and those who have been broken by the assaults of life. We hear that those with wealth have as their primary responsibility, the responsibility to care for the poor. This is our sacred story.

Continuing in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, *love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?* In Luke's Gospel, we hear the fullest explanation of what Jesus means when he tells us to love one another as neighbors. In Luke's Gospel, we see it is God's intention that our lives, our actions, and our motivations will be reshaped through our interactions with God. This is our sacred story.

In the tenth chapter, a man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan was the despised enemy of the man who asked the question. The Samaritan was considered to be the worst person, the person you do not want to encounter ever, and certainly not on a dark street, alone. In Luke's Gospel, we hear that God's purpose is universal salvation.

We hear that in God's eyes there are no bad people. In Luke's Gospel, we hear that salvation is offered to women and men, Gentiles and Jews, rich people and poor people. This is our sacred story.

In the sixteenth chapter we heard the story of Lazarus and the rich man. In Luke's Gospel, the poor, broken man named Lazarus goes to heaven. The rich man who had no concern for the poor man who slept at his gate goes to hell. In Luke's Gospel, we see one of God's primary concerns is for freedom for those who are oppressed. We see God's purpose is to overturn the existing oppressive political order. This is our sacred story.

In chapter seventeen we heard the story of Jesus healing ten men suffering from leprosy. *Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice...and he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?"* In Luke's Gospel, we see there are two primary features of salvation. The first is to return to God. The first is to stop and turn back to God. The second is gratitude. In Luke's Gospel, we see that gratitude is a crucial step in the path of salvation. This is our sacred story.

In chapter eighteen *people were bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it...and Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me."* In Luke's Gospel children are not to be excluded or pushed to the edge of the conversation. In Luke's Gospel whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. This is our sacred story.

In chapter nineteen we heard the story of Zacchaeus. *He was a chief tax collector, and he was rich...He was trying to see who Jesus was...so he ran ahead and climbed a Sycamore tree..When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and spoke to him.* In Luke's Gospel, we come face to face with God, but only in our humility. In Luke's Gospel, we see that God is seeking us, but we only see this when we leave behind our pride and seek God wholeheartedly. This is our sacred story.

Today we heard the story of the two criminals who were crucified along with Jesus. The soldiers mocked Jesus, and the leaders said, *"He saved others; let him save himself..." One of the criminals..kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying "Do you not fear God?...We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* In Luke's Gospel, each person has the power of free will. Each person has the choice of rejecting or embracing God's work. Each person has the choice of dwelling in the power of God's love or refusing to see and understand. Each person has the choice of being cruel or loving. This is our sacred story.

In chapter twenty-four, near the very end of the Gospel, we come to the story of two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. The disciples were confused and afraid by the events of the previous days. As they were walking they began to talk with a man. Their conversation went on for some time. He gave them many insights into their journey and into the meaning of the scriptures. Later, *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him* as the risen Christ. In the Gospel of Luke we see that truth and strength will come to us in unexpected times and situations. We are called to see the face of Christ in the faces of strangers we meet along the road. This is our sacred story.

This is our story. It is a story of a mission that is shared by us and by God. It is a story of us living our most authentic lives. It is a story of our sacred connections with those who came before, and those who come after us. It is a story of equity. It is a story of our lives being reshaped by our engagement with God's mission. It is a story of God's intention for salvation to come to all people. It is a story of God's great desire for freedom for the oppressed. It is a story of people returning to God. It is a story of children not being pushed aside. It is a story of the power of humility. It is a story of the power we have to choose. It is a story of seeing God's face in the faces of strangers. This is our sacred story.