

Salvation Has Come to This House

Luke 18:31–19:10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is the fifth Sunday of our Lent. The theme we are exploring this year is called “Christ Collides.”

Each week, we are making our way through a portion of Luke’s gospel, paying attention to how Jesus’ teachings, his interactions with others, and his stories collide with our assumptions, our expectations, our preferences, and our world.

I don’t often begin a sermon with advertising. But I wanted to make you aware of an album that was released on Friday.

It’s by an American singer-songwriter named Jon Guerra. I’ve played a few of his songs in our worship services in the past. One of these is called “Kingdom of God” which might be one of my favourite songs of the last half decade or so.

It’s a lyrical blending of the beatitudes and Psalm 23. It contains a line that is ringing around my head nearly every Monday morning as I turn my car into the parking lot of the jail: *Blessed are the guilty who have nowhere to go.*

I can hardly ever listen to that song and that line without getting a lump in my throat.

At any rate, Jon Guerra released a new album on Friday. It’s called, simply, “Jesus.”¹ I’ve been listening to it pretty much nonstop since. It was in my headphones while I wrote this sermon.

According to Guerra, the album is a “conversation with the words of Christ.” It has songs with not-very-marketing-friendly titles like “Who Is Greatest?” and “Take Up Your Cross” and “Love Your Enemies” and “Gethsemane.”

¹ <https://music.apple.com/ca/album/jesus/1802396898>

The album is, in many ways, a musical tour through our Lenten theme of Christ colliding with us. It confronts us with this strange and beautiful figure of Jesus, of his saving goodness and of his bracing call. It's also just a flat-out beautiful album (in my view, at least).

So, if you're looking for a good soundtrack for the last two weeks of the Lenten season, a good musical and lyrical guide toward Easter and beyond, this is a good option. I know that music speaks to some people in ways that a sermon never could.

Yes, musical taste is highly subjective, everyone has different styles, etc. I get all this.

But this album has been good for my soul. Perhaps it will be for yours, too.

OK, thus endeth the advertisement.

Today, we have three very different encounters with Jesus that turn out in the end to have something of a common thread linking them together.

The disciples, a blind beggar, and a tax-collector named Zacchaeus.

As a way into these three stories, I want to begin with an article that I came across a few weeks ago and filed away for future use.

The article is by an Episcopalian priest named Jon Zahl. He serves at St. Matthew's Church in Bedford, New York. The article is actually a reprinted sermon called "Giving Up Your Quiet Little Pact with Despair."

Zahl is reflecting on a Psalm with the line, "When you send forth your spirit...you *renew* the face of the ground" and asking if we think newness is really possible.

Here's what Jon Zahl had to say:

The image we are given is that of ground being renewed — of spring coming after winter, or of rain coming after drought. It is about dead and unproductive land becoming fertile and lush once again. The metaphor is not subtle, and its range of

application is wide: **It can relate to any part of our lives or community that feels lifeless or stuck in a rut. Who doesn't want their life to be creative and lush with life instead of dry and stuck?**

Anyone? Anyone?

Zahl goes on:

Do you really believe that the Spirit of God can and will renew the fallow ground in your life — that there really is renewal to be had in the part of your existence that seems hopeless or unfulfilled? **Or, almost without realizing it, have you made a quiet little pact with despair?** (Let the question sit with you.) Has some part of you accepted that repetitions are the fact of the matter, that they cannot and will not ever change? Have you put a brave face on this conclusion by calling it “realism,” when really what you are is resigned to despair, and lacking in hope?

Anyone? Anyone?

Moving on. He drills a bit deeper:

Consider a few examples of despair. Despair that a child will never find her way in the world. Or despair about the situation with your spouse, that you will never really be happy in your marriage. Or we might be talking about your professional life... Or perhaps we're talking about despair over the state of the Church, over the perception that our culture has lost its appreciation for the value of faith.

In each of these situations, there is the temptation to think of oneself as some kind of a tragic hero, quietly fighting a long defeat in the face of overwhelming odds. Have you become, to your way of thinking, a bit of a martyr in some pronounced area of your day-to-day life? This too is a pact with despair.²

Whew. He's asking some very difficult, very personal questions, isn't he? But they are important questions for each of us to consider.

I suspect there are very few people in this sanctuary who cannot resonate with at least some of what Jon Zahl says.

² https://mbird.com/the-magazine/giving-up-your-quiet-little-pact-with-despair/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=giving-up-your-quiet-little-pact-with-despair

Of being in a rut. Or feeling stuck. Of feeling a little low on hope.

Of having some area of your life where you've just kind of settled into a kind of low-grade sadness or grudging acceptance. *I guess this is as good as it's going to get.*

Of quietly resigning yourself to the fact that newness isn't really possible, no matter what fancy words might come out of the preacher's mouth on any given Sunday.

And maybe even, as Zahl says, imagining yourself to be a kind of tragic hero or a bit of a martyr! This can be a tempting road, at times, and it's one that many people take.

I say all this not from some high above the fray position or as a kind of dispassionate analyst of "human beings in the wild."

I recognize myself in some of what Zahl says. It's easy to look out at the world or at the church or at our own lives and think the teacher in Ecclesiastes was right. *There is nothing new under the sun.*

Newness sounds good when it comes out of the mouth of Jesus. And boy, it would sure be nice! But that's just not how the world works.

I wonder if any of the characters in our three gospel stories today had made their own quiet little pacts with despair.

We have a blind man begging by the side of the road. We don't know the back story, but it's not hard to imagine a lifetime of hardship and sorrow, of mistreatment and misunderstanding, of poverty and affliction.

I suspect it would have been very easy for him to think, "Nothing will ever change. This is just my lot in life."

We have Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax collector, a collaborator with the hated Roman occupiers. Materially, he is of course way better off than the blind man. He is "wealthy," at least when it comes to money.

But I wonder if the money never really did what he thought it would for him. I wonder if he was lonely, isolated from his community, hated by many and trusted by few. This is a hard way to live.

Perhaps Zacchaeus just thought, “Well, I’ve made my bed and now I have to lay in it.”

And then we have the disciples. This one is less obvious. The disciples are on the front lines of newness, after all! They’ve seen the miracles, the revolutionary teaching, the radical upending of the status quo.

They surely are primed for something new.

But they’re struggling with his words about suffering and dying. They don’t understand. It doesn’t fit the pattern they’ve been observing.

Perhaps doubts are creeping into their minds. *This all felt so promising and exciting. Why is he so morbid? He can’t die! That’s not how this story goes. Surely this story can’t just end like all the others?!*

Newness is hard to believe in. We’re so used to the way things go. We’ve had our hopes dashed one too many times. We’re afraid to take the risk of believing that things could change.

I suspect the same was true, to varying degrees and in different ways in each of our three stories from Luke.

And then Jesus did what Jesus does. He takes a small scrap of faith or desperation, and he brings newness.

The blind man may have made a quiet little pact with despair, but he clearly knows enough about Jesus to believe that maybe, just maybe, things might be different with him. He cries out for mercy (sometimes that’s all we can do!).

The crowd tries to shut him up. Jesus has important things to do, after all. But the blind man just yells all the louder.

Jesus stops and orders the man be brought to him. He dignifies him by asking him what he wants (instead of just assuming he knows). And Jesus restores his sight. He tells him his faith has made him well.

Apparently, “Have mercy on me” counts as “faith.”

What about Zacchaeus. Why is he lurking around Jesus? Simple curiosity? Perhaps. But there’s almost certainly some longing for something better at work here, too.

He knows that this Jesus is somehow different, that offer something different, that he in *some* way an interruption to business as usual.

He climbs the tree to get a better view only to be told to come down, he is going to be a host instead of a spectator. Jesus is coming over for dinner, much to the displeasure of the watching crowd who can’t imagine why he would associate with a “sinner.”

We don’t know what happened over dinner (I wish Luke would have said something about that). But by the end, Zacchaeus has done a 180 in his life. He’s promising to give half his wealth away and to pay back any of his unscrupulous earnings fourfold.

Jesus says that “salvation has come to the house.”

Apparently, giving away your money and righting those you’ve wronged also counts as faith.

In both cases, newness comes crashing into business as usual when Jesus shows up on the scene.

What about the disciples? What about this interaction about suffering and dying that began our reading today?

What does this have to do with newness? Surely there is nothing older and more wearily familiar than suffering and death!

I want to return to the article/sermon by Jon Zahl:

The second point is the one that I am more hesitant to talk about, but it is unavoidable. It is that the path to renewal usually leads first through suffering and thwartedness and defeat. **The shipwreck of our plans and dreams for ourselves is typically the place where new life begins.**

This is what the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, refers to as the “cruciform” shape of the Christian life. The Christian Church was founded on Calvary, at the foot of the Cross, and **that is both the once-for-all-time fact and foundation of the religion, and it is also the pattern God’s Spirit continues to employ in its renewing work.**

This was true for the disciples. Renewal came through suffering. Jesus’ suffering and eventually their own. The early church was in many ways born in suffering and persecution.

And this is true for us as well. **Sometimes, something has to die before something new or better can come to life.**

Sometimes an expectation or a dream has to die.

Sometimes, like Zacchaeus, our attachment to money and things must die (we talked about this last Sunday).

Sometimes a destructive habit or pattern of living will have to die.

Sometimes our understanding of ourselves will have to die.

Sometimes, our quiet little pacts with despair have to die—we will have to stop seeing ourselves as martyrs or victims and open ourselves up to something better.

And sometimes, we’ll have to just go through really hard things in life, whether it’s physical pain or emotional pain or relational pain or the death of someone close to us or long seasons of doubt or a spiritual crisis.

And then, if we are willing and if we are open to Jesus, and we cling to him as we walk through whatever “death” we are facing, we discover that there is life and newness and hope on the other side. Perhaps we discover that there are things we could not have learned any other way on the other side.

I believe that Rowan William is right—the Christian life has a cruciform shape. Life comes out of death.

Newness is always possible with Jesus, even if it doesn't always arrive in the same way, even if it sometimes takes us where we'd rather not go.

Jesus is not and has never been a vending machine of made-to-order blessings!

For the beggar, newness came in the form of a miracle in response to a simple cry for mercy. This is the newness most of us hope for! Jesus just fixes the problem. And this does happen, although I would submit it's the exception.

For Zacchaeus, newness came in the form of a dinner party that he was surprised to find himself hosting, where the guest confronted and convicted him and turned his life around.

This is the path to newness that is more common.

For the disciples, newness came in the form of an ominous foreshadowing of a pattern they would come to learn well. Life out of death.

This is the path to newness that we wish we could avoid. But it is the pattern of Jesus, and it is the bedrock of our faith. Something has to die in order for something new to live.

Whatever the path might look like for us, salvation can come to our houses, too.

When we open ourselves up to Jesus. When we give up our quiet little pacts with despair and take a step, even a small step, of trust.

When we cry out for mercy, like the blind beggar. When we are curious enough to crack open the door and do some personal inventory, like Zacchaeus. When we are confronted with the cross-shaped pattern of the Christian life, like the disciples.

May God help us to be open to the One who promises to make all things new.

Amen.

