

Overlooked Bible Stories: The Plot to Kill Lazarus

Our sacred scriptures contain familiar stories of joy, love and peace, of forgiveness and redemption and salvation... But there are also many other stories that for some reason or another we find ourselves skipping over or missing out on when we were growing up in Sunday school.

This month, we have been exploring a few of these “other” stories – in our sermon series entitled “Overlooked Bible Stories.”

Some of these may be familiar to you, or they may be totally brand new for you. But the theory we are operating under is that no matter how obscure the story or a detail of the story is... there is still divine wisdom found in these passages that we can apply to our contemporary lives.

Our first week we looked at the Story of Balaam and his talking donkey... and we reflected on who those people are that act as donkeys in our lives....those people who call us back to God’s path for our life.....

Then in our second week, we moved on to the story of the Prophet Elisha....who after being made fun of by a group of young men spoke a curse towards them which lead to two bears coming and mauling them....and we were reminded from this story about the power that our words carry....and their ability to either build one another up.....or tear one another apart.....

Last week we heard about Eutycus....the young man who dozed off during one of the Apostle Paul’s longer sermons and fell out of the top story window to his death....but then by the power of the Holy Spirit...Paul brought Eutycus back to life..... and in this we learned that sometimes we can all spiritually fall asleep...and we talked about the importance of staying awake to how God is working in our lives in and in the world...

And this morning, we will be talking about another man who was brought back to life.....Lazarus...

As a child, one of my favorite things about riding in the car with my grandparents was that we would listen to Paul Harvey's *The Rest of the Story* radio show. As you may recall, in this program the host would tell a story with many little known and forgotten facts on a variety of subjects with some key element (usually the name of some well-known person) held back until the end. It was a perfect mix on intelligence, surprise and entertainment.

I think Lazarus would have made for a great edition of Mr. Harvey's radio show....

And that is because Lazarus is a name that most church-goers have probably heard before. He is by no means an unknown character in the Biblical narrative. John's gospel tells us that Lazarus was dead for four whole days when Jesus came into town and brought him back to life. If that doesn't make a person famous, nothing will!

However, even though this story is well known, very little attention is given to what Lazarus actually did with his life after Jesus had restored it....and from our short text this morning we discover at least few things he did....

- 1) He stayed by Jesus' side, he didn't say I need to go away on vacation....or I am never leaving the house again....or I am never going to be more than 5 feet away from my loved ones agains...No Lazarus continued to walk with Jesus.
- 2) He became somewhat of a celebrity...he was famous or infamous depending on who you asked for being the guy Jesus brought back to life.
- 3) He shared his story....he shared his testimony....he shared how his encounter with Jesus had literally given him new life...

4) We know He was making a difference... because of his experience....people we putting their faith in Christ.

5) And finally, we know that all of this.....put a target on his back.....

Just as Jesus was a threat to the social order....Just as Jesus was a threat to those religious folks who had began to build their teachings around themselves....instead of around God..... So too was Lazarus a threat...because his life.....each breath he took was a validation of Jesus' power, authority and divinity....

I have come to believe that the power of these stories we hear from the Bible doesn't lie in the fact that they happened.....but the power is in the fact that they happen....

Throughout this series we have been finding ourselves in the story.....we have found ourselves being as stubborn as Balaam and waling down a path of destruction...

We have found ourselves as the Prophet Elisha....struck by the power and authorly that our words have to build up or tear down....

We have found ourselves as Eutyclus...falling spiritually asleep and risking a great fall if we aren't careful...

And this morning....as we place ourselves in Lazarus' story.... I believe that we have a question we need to start with....a question that we need to ask ourselves....

“Do we believe that our lives are the validation of Jesus' power, authority and divinity?”

Because just like Lazarus, our lives have a story to tell.

Our lives tell the story of redemption....of faith.....of service...of unconditional love.... Or at least they do if we allow them too....

We all know we aren't gathered here together because we are perfect....in fact it is the exact opposite....we are gathered here because

we are broken....we are gathered here because we need to hear a word of hope.....we are gathered here because we need redemption....we need comfort and we need to be lifted up.....

And that is exactly what Jesus does for us....that is exactly what God's Holy Spirit does for us.....

And guess what....leaving here spiritually filled....leaving here with a sense of renewal...or peace or reconciliation isn't any less of a miracle....than Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life after 4 days of death....

Because as some of in here know.....we can go way longer than 4 days when it comes to spiritual or emotional death....

There are some of us here who felt as close to death as one can feel for months.....some even for years....until the day where we opened ourselves up to the unconditional love and grace offered to us by God...the grace and love offered to us by a community of faith and experienced what it meant to have "New Life."

Coming back to life through the power of God.....being restored to our full and healthy selves isn't something that just happened 2,000 years ago.....it happens today.

Maybe it wasn't that dramatic for you....maybe it wasn't some Heavens open up....angels sing....light surrounds you moment..... but think back and ask yourself....was there a moment....or were there moments...when you felt the power of God in your life....

John Wesley the founder of the movement that would become the United Methodist Church which this congregation is a part of experienced a time like this....and it wasn't until after he was an ordained priest...and after he failed at being a missionary in America.... But it wasn't a huge crazy experience....he simply said it felt like his heart was being strangely warmed..... but in that...he was spiritually

resuscitated ...he was at that moment....during a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London brought back to the fullness of life.

There are many of us here you have had those kind of experiences...and there are those here who will have that kind of experience if they seek to...

But know....as the rest of Lazarus' story this morning shows us....when we experience and embrace the life that God has for us...people are going to notice....

And that's a good thing....Because just as Lazarus' life brought new people to people to the abundance found in Christ, our lives can too.

I think it can be too easy for us to forget the power our lives have....the kind of difference each one of us can make simply by loving others...the way we have been loved....by embracing the fullness of life we have and sharing God's love with others....

One the CBS evening news there is a segment called "On the Road with Steve Hartman."

And recently one of my friends who I worked with when I was a chaplain at the San Ramon Fire Department...her name is Sonia...(some of you met her when she visited us in worship a couple weeks ago....) sent me an e-mail last week with a YouTube link showing one of these "One the Road" Segments.

It took place at Boca Rotan High School in Florida....

Just like every other high school in America, When the noontime bell rings Boca's 3400 hundred students enter the courtyard pull out their brown bag lunches and separate into their various circles of friends and cliques....

But as you start to look around you notice sometime....that not everyone has a group to go to....not everyone has a friend to sit with....many kids find themselves sitting alone.

Well that was until senior Dennis Estaban...a first generation Haitian immigrant who came to the US when he was in the first grade....decided he was going to make sure no one at his school should ever have sit alone again....

You see Dennis remembered how hard it was when he first moved to the US when he was younger...and how hard it was for him to be accepted at school...that it felt like no one payed attention to or cared for his life....that he was invisible.....he felt like he could disappear and not one person would care.....

But in the last few years things had started to change for Dennis...he started to make friends and become a well-known face around school...he describes it has “finding his life”or as “being given his life...”

So....he decided to leverage his new friends and his influence into starting a club called “We Dine Together.”

Their mission is to go into the courtyard at lunchtime to make sure no one is starving for company....

For new kids especially....the club is a Godsend....

Since it started in the Fall of 2016, hundreds of Friendships have formed....

One of the student leaders in the club actually gave up his position as captain of the football team so he could put his complete focus into growing this ministry....because that’s what it really is right? A ministry...

Just imagine how different your teenage years would have been if the coolest kids in school all of the sudden decided that you mattered....

And the students of the “Dining Together Club” at Boca High School aren’t done yet.....starting in 2017 they began reaching out to other high schools across the country to help them from Clubs of their own....

Dennis felt lost....he felt unseen....he felt like his life did not matter to anyone else.....but, when he had been given life...when he had been given popularity....confidence....influence....when his spirit had been brought to life.....he shared it...

Church.....we are called to do the same.....

It won't always be easy.....it won't always be comfortable.....it will sometimes be messy.....but we have to share our lives with others.....

Because our lives are the best testimony of Christ's love and power that the world could ever see....

But as much as the world needs us.....so too will elements of the world Reject us.....

Just as Lazarus' life and his story turned people towards Jesus....it also put a target on his back....

It also put him at risk.....

Because it is impossible to follow Jesus without standing out..... it is impossible to follow the ways of Jesus without ruffling the feathers of those who have something to lose.....

When we represent Jesus Christ...it that sets us apart, not above the world...not better than the world...but definitely different from the world....

Mother Teresa once said "We must never be afraid to be a sign of contradiction for the world...."

And if we are true to our call, we will be a contradiction....

When I first moved to Carmel in July...one of the first things I did was visit the other churches in our county.... I visited churches here in Carmel...and out in Pacific Grove and Marina and Monterey.....but the church I was most blown away by in terms of their outreach was Salinas First United Methodist Church.

I shared with you all in one of my early sermons here about how powerful the experience was to see their amazing outreach to the homeless community.....

But what I didn't share with you is how many feathers they have ruffled along the way.....

Complaints from the Chamber of Commerce.....Petitions from neighbors for them to stop them from feeding the homeless.....and even a lawsuit against the city....because the church had been awarded a grant to refurbish their kitchen so they could effectively feed all the people they need to...yet...the church continued on....they continued caring for the people who no one else would care for.....

Until finally, Steve, the Pastor of Salinas First was telling me at one of our monthly meetings how after the storm of having various community and business leaders curse his name and yell about the church at every city council meeting.....hearts were beginning to warm....these community leaders are starting to understand why this ministry is so vital....and what it can lead to...

Now of course there will always be naysayers...there will always be those who are threatened by God's economy of Justice and grace.....But God will carry us through the storm....and that is exactly what is happening over at Salinas first....

Our lives are testimonies.....our lives are proof that God is never done with anyone..... Our lives are a force for good to those who are lost or in need.....and our lives are the greatest threat to those who believe God doesn't care for and include everyone equally. Our lives are the greatest threat to those who hold all the power and refuse to share any of that power with those who they deem as less-than....

I Would like to close today with a reading from The Rev. Steve-Garnaas Holmes, a United Methodist Pastor and contributor to our United Methodist Book of Worship....This is simply entitled: "Death"

*Death, we are certain,
is final, a wall.
But Jesus says death
is not final at all:
not a wall but a curtain,
a hallway, a door,
a passage to something
uncertain but More.*

*Death is a darkness
and death is a dawn,
a deep letting go,
and a bright moving on.*

*The door is unlocked;
if you push it will give.
First you die, Jesus says,
first you die, then you live.*

*Help me, God, by your grace,
every moment, each breath
in and out, to receive
the new birth we call death,
like Lazarus, swaddled,
and just coming to,
awake from the birth canal,
risen and new.*

May we remember that we belong to a God who has come to show mercy, grace and the fullness of life to all people....not just “the right” people....

May we remember that our stories matter.....that our past...who we were before we embraced God’s life for us..... And our present--who we are after embracing God’s life for us..... is the proof....is the testimony that Christ has come.....

May we use each breath of new life to share God’s love with others....Amen.