

Sermon for Sunday, March 30, 2025

Luke 16:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The basic outline for today's sermon is this: I will begin by speaking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus told. From the "learnings" that come out of that parable I'm going to move to the story of Moses and the burning bush. There's a connection between the two that I intend to emphasize. Through that emphasis I will return to our underlying theme for Lent and for all of our readings: how then shall we live?

To begin, I want to remind you that Jesus told this parable 2000 years ago. Clearly he was aware of the deep disparities that existed between the very rich and the poor, even then.

Often when we consider a parable we try to figure out who the characters represent. We've done that a couple of times over the last few weeks. Today, let's not focus on who the characters represent and instead we're just going to focus on the story. As Jesus tells the parable the rich man was dressed in purple cloth and fine linen. This man was clothed in the most expensive apparel available in that time and place. Purple dye was rare and exceedingly labor intensive to collect. Only the very rich could afford clothing colored with this dye. It is also reported that this rich man ate sumptuously every day. The word describing how the rich man ate was also used to describe the feast (with a fatted calf) that the father lavished upon the prodigal son. One could say that the rich man eats a Thanksgiving feast every day.

While we personally may not be a rich man, we know that compared to some in our country and in our world, we would be considered very rich. That's important to acknowledge.

Now let's think about the relationship between the rich man and the poor man Lazarus. Jesus is making a point when he gives the poor man a name....in fact, in all of the parables that Jesus told, this one poor man is the only character to have a name—Lazarus. The parable says that Lazarus lays in the rich man's gate and hopes for scraps from the feast.

- In Bible times there was no silverware. Diners used crusts of bread to sop up the leavings in a bowl. The rich would often discard these crusts of bread and the poor people

would hope that these crusts would be given to them by someone in the household. As Jesus tells it, Lazarus longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the table....with those crusts of bread.

- Lazarus is sick. He has sores on his skin. The parable says that dogs would come and lick these sores. Now in our day and time we view dogs as family pets but that was not the case 2000 years ago. Dogs licking Lazarus' sores would be more like having a raccoon come and lick our skin in our day. The image of a dog licking Lazarus' skin is intended to convey just how weak and degraded his condition was. He couldn't even shoo varmints away.
- Finally, Lazarus lays in the rich man's gate. It would be like having a person laying on your front porch. It is conceivable that the rich man would have to step over him to leave his home. In fact Lazarus is so RIGHT THERE, that the rich man knows his name. Lazarus is not an anonymous stranger lying at a distance in the village square. Lazarus is RIGHT THERE in front of his home.

Since we are not necessarily the Lazarus figures, nor are we the excessively rich let's turn now to the passage from Exodus 3 in which Moses sees a burning bush—a bush that is not consumed even though it is on fire. My next thoughts were inspired by an essay written by Bishop Mariann Budde, and published on March 19, 2025 on the Episcopal Diocese of Washington DC's website. I'm going to quote her at length. Bishop Budde writes:

"You may recall that one day Moses was caring for his father-in-law's sheep when he noticed a burning bush. It fascinated him, because the fire never seemed to go out and the bush was not consumed. God then spoke to Moses from out of the bush—a mystical encounter that would forever change his life and that of his enslaved relatives living in Egypt.

"The burning bush was not a miracle," Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes. "It was a test. God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke."¹

Bishop Budde goes on, "There are burning bushes everywhere.....When there are burning bushes everywhere, I wondered, which one speaks to us of God? I don't believe that God has started the fires that are all around us now, but I am pondering what God might be saying to us through them.

"Some of the fires need to be addressed by anyone who has eyes to see them. If God is speaking through these fires, surely the invitation is open-ended: Is there anyone willing to help?...

"Imagine God's gratitude when we see a burning bush of need and respond,...out of the desire to ease another's suffering. With so much suffering everywhere, we needn't look far." **Close quote.**

Which brings me back to Lazarus lying at the rich man's gate. My statements aren't necessarily about the rich men that are constantly in the news these days. We can point fingers and say "tsk, tsk." But as Bishop Budde said, "With so much suffering everywhere, we needn't look far."

God is asking us to stop and look at the burning bush that God has placed in front of us; that God has placed in our gate. The burning bush is so close that you have to step over or walk around it to go about your business. There are Lazaruses at our doorsteps.

Now, I understand, because I feel it resonating within me, "What can I do?" I also feel a certain amount of frustration because I don't have answers. But Moses didn't know what to do either when God confronted him through the burning bush. And BTW, Moses didn't have the power, courage, or strength within himself to do what God was asking of him. (Three times he made excuses and tried to get out of the call) Everything that Moses "did" was powered by God and done at God's command.

My friends, there are people that are hungry, thirsty, suffering from medical challenges, without a place to live, being threatened with deportation, or being arrested without cause in this country. They are the Lazarus figures of our time. There are also exceedingly rich people in this country who are clueless about the needs of these Lazarus people. But you are followers of Jesus. You have God's Holy spirit residing within you. That Spirit opens your eyes to the needs of the Lazarus people around you. That Spirit will call you to act.

My friends, if God puts a burning bush in front of you take the time to stop and look deeply at it. Listen for God's voice and spend time in prayer asking what it is that God is asking of you. "If the world brings you to it, God will help you through it." You are stronger and braver than you know. With the help of God's Holy Spirit, given to you in your baptism, you can make a difference in this world, and especially to the "Lazaruses" that are lying outside of our gates. Amen.

Another Mike Vetsch poem dated March 11, 2025
kindness, fear, wink

A single act
of kindness
can diminish
fear.
Extending a hand
or a heart
can lead
to a fruitful tear.
A quick wink
can signal
I am here
to keep you clear
from sorrow
and pain,
until the rain
can wash it
all
away.

Amen.