

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# You Gotta Start...

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You can enjoy a random episode of the *British Baking Show* without any knowledge of the contestants' prior ability to meet the technical challenge or bake a show-stopper cake worthy of advancing to the next round of competition. Episodes differ from one another only by the dwindling number of contestants in the pursuit of the title of "star baker." Each episode stands alone with perhaps enough entertainment value to entice you to tune in again.

Not so with *Game of Thrones* or many other contemporary series. When you begin matters. Each episode in the series builds complexity between characters from a murderous past towards an ever-frightening future. Screenwriters neglect any recaps of past episodes, assuming you'll start at the beginning, stockpile episodes, or will binge watch. Jumping into a random episode baffles the viewer.

I mention all this as we pick up today's parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. To read this story apart from the rest of the gospel makes us cringe. In the Bible Read Along, one person lamented, "where is the hope?" The finality and biting language makes us wince.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus laces the stories with commentary. He takes us from the depth a crisis by pointing to the ancient prophets and laws, asking us to change our ways, and inviting us to begin again.

Let me give the “highlights of prior episodes” so you know as much as those who started at the beginning.

Jesus descends from the Israelite tradition. Honor the laws to bring about a just society. Care for the welfare of others, regardless of who they are, family, immigrant, or stranger.

During Mary’s pregnancy with him, she sang of the reversals to come in her *Magnificat*. He will bring down the powerful and lift the lowly.

Jesus preached a sermon on the plain that “Blessed are you that hunger now: for you shall be filled” and warned of “Woe to you, that are full now, for you shall hunger.”

Today’s story comes on the heels of Jesus’ three parables of lost and found. God showers us with mercy when we return, even if reluctantly, to the fellowship of others. We were made for joy. Just prior to this parable, Jesus warns his followers that they cannot serve God and wealth.

Before I read what comes next, please pray with me.

*Dear God, we are eager to hear your word for us. Distance us from all the things that consume our mind, the hectic calendars, the fraught relationships, the self-doubt. Send your spirit among us and these ancient words, that we hear them as clearly as if Jesus spoke. Illuminate our hearts and minds with your desire for our lives. Amen.*

**Luke 16:19-31**

<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup>who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

<sup>22</sup>The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

<sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’

<sup>25</sup>But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup>Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup>He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers—that he

may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.'

<sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'<sup>30</sup>He said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'<sup>31</sup>He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

And so, the story begins, "there was a rich man," code words for "villain" in any of Jesus' parables. He dressed in the finest clothes. Feasted on the best food; *alone*, you might have noticed. Luke claims he "lived in luxury every day." And every day he ignored the poor man at his gate.

Names matter. The rich man could be anyone. The other man, Lazarus could also be anyone among us, but Jesus gives him a name, which means "God helps."

The rich man and Lazarus live side-by-side, but neither by choice. Our text claims Lazarus *lay* at the rich man's gate, but the Greek verb implies someone literally dumped or threw him down. Perhaps they discarded Lazarus outside the gates of a wealthy Jew in the hopes he would receive mercy.

Not the case. Chronic hunger plagued him. The rags he wore failed to conceal his lesions. Much of the art painted and sculpted through the centuries emphasized, the dogs licked his sores, abusing him, making a meal of him. Degraded by

poverty and destroyed by human indifference he exists in a sub-human state.

When death comes to both men, angels carry away Lazarus while the rich man's wealth bought a proper burial.

At one point in life a mere gate separated them, a gate that could be opened and closed. Now a chasm divides. This chasm refers to a gorge, formed from daily erosion that eventually excavates an insurmountable divide.

Mary's reversal comes to light with the rich man suffering. Because he was wealthy? That is far too superficial a reading and nowhere does Jesus ever condemn wealth.

Maybe the tragedy of the rich man is less about him burning in Hades and more about the way he constructed his life, sanitized it, and cut off himself from the rest of humanity. Maybe Jesus' story of this rich man's hopeless end – a fate sealed in death – becomes the clarion call of hope for those who hear it.

Jesus' audience might have recognized these characters and plot line from a classic folktale. Scholars estimate it originated in Egypt and spread among the Gentiles around the Mediterranean. This classic plot traces a direct line from a character's values and he consequences of their choices to an imaged future.

Jesus' parable throws down this story next to our lives to provoke a change of heart and mind in his listeners.<sup>1</sup>

The old folktale lives on today in the stories we know.

Recall the iconic story, *A Christmas Carol*? Dickens' plot follows the same course. This holiday favorite includes imagined ghosts of Christmas' past, present, and future. The story tells of a dream converting a stubborn, closed-in, old man to a life of generosity and joy.

Once Scrooge literally and figurately wakes up he says, a man's course "will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change."

Whether the ancient folktale, Jesus' story of Lazarus, or poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *A Christmas Carol*, quite simply, the truth endures: we create our heavenly rewards by the way we live today.

All of Jesus' parables invite us to see how our life impinges upon others, our decisions to use our resources – time and talent and treasure – for the benefit of all of God's creation or not. We don't earn heaven, but it is ours to lose.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levin, *Short Stories by Jesus*, (New York: Harper One, 2014) 194.



Jesus speaks about the kingdom of heaven, not as an ethereal destination where our soul goes after we die; it begins now. Remember that line, “on earth as it is in heaven?”

Jesus reshapes the familiar folktale from the first century, placing Abraham at the pinnacle. His listeners knew this revered patriarch of faith welcomed the stranger, fed those who appeared hungry at his tent, and crossed great divides.

Even while in Hades, the rich man might not get it. All along, the rich man felt entitled to salvation merely by his family tree. He landed in Hades not from being too rich, he bought his eternal fate by ignoring all the prophets and laws from the beginning of time that teach us to care for one another. By the way he ignored Lazarus, he ignored God.

Jesus drives home the lesson when Abraham rebuffs the rich man’s idea to send Lazarus to tell his brother, who must be living the same downwards spiral.

If his brothers have refused to listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen to a poor nobody who rises from the dead? Such self-center people will ignore any signs of the truth rather than upset their self-serving lifestyles. This parable suggests that God speaks all the time. And yet our quest for certitude often becomes an excuse for not acting.

Jesus' little story tells us that us: you gotta start somewhere to live your faith. Open your gate to the people outside. Share your dinner table.

You gotta start listening to the prophets of old enough. Maybe this old fable.

You gotta start trusting the stories handed down - particularly the poor nobody who rises from the dead.

A week or so ago, I drove south on Washington Road towards McMurry. Since I live in Mt. Lebanon, I rarely drive too far south. Along the way, you can become almost immune to the frequency of PennDOT signs that label the center lanes for tuning one way or another. When construction begins or ends. Speed limits.

One sign stood out. In official PennDOT script, all it says is "BEGIN."

BEGIN. Begin what? Obviously, the companion sign was missing.

I almost laughed. What a prophetic sign. Do we need anything louder or clearer? A few days later, I doubted myself and drove south, again. There it is, BEGIN.

It doesn't matter where I came from or where I am headed. Just BEGIN.

BEGIN to feed the hungry. Host food drives. Tend gardens. Throw dinners. Deliver QuickKits. All of these individual and community acts care for the Lazarus among us. The Reverend Dr James Forbes, former pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, one said, “no one gets into heaven without a reference letter from the poor.”

BEGIN to listen, listening to the voice of the prophet crying for a change. Maybe we should have listened to one another decades ago before houses began dividing against others and even within. Our polarized nation shows that we failed to hear one another, but we can start now.

BEGIN to interpret the all the signs. The signs of neighbors -- parents and teens -- whose anxiety grows as hopelessness closes in are as prevalent as if Lazarus were laid at our gate. No longer can we brush these symptoms under the rug or whisper as if in shame.

BEGIN to believe the age-old stories that call us to wake up to the consequences of our actions. These might be old fables, our holy scripture, or animated in virtual reality. When we trust these stories more than toxic hearsay that drives us into seclusion, we start to do what we promised we'd do in our baptismal vows for one another and for God.

If this episode in Luke's gospel ended and screenwriters presented previews of the next, we'd hear more stories and

the religious authorities ask, “when is the kingdom of God coming.” Jesus cuts to the chase: “the kingdom of God is among you.”



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