

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 16, 2022

+ Luke 16:19-31 +

“God Helps”

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A beggar named Lazarus had been laid at his gate. Lazarus was covered with sores and longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Besides this, the dogs also came and licked his sores. Eventually the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus at his side. He called out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in misery in this flame.’

“But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in misery. Besides all this, a great chasm has been set in place between us and you, so that those who want to cross from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

“He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s home, because I have five brothers – to warn them, so that they will not come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’

‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Lazarus goes to heaven. The rich man goes to hell. Needless to say, we want to go where Lazarus goes. And we want to avoid going where the rich man goes. So let’s carefully watch and listen to both of them. And let’s ask God to give us the heart of Lazarus. And let’s ask God to fight with us to conquer any trace of the rich man in us.

The story begins with a very brief biography of both of their lives in this world. Jesus gives us a one-sentence summary of the rich man’s life: **“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day.”** Every day he is dressed well and living in luxury. But the problem is not that he’s rich. It’s that his wealth is his life. This is plain to see from the two-sentence biography of the beggar at his gate: **“A beggar named Lazarus had been laid at his gate. Lazarus was covered with sores and longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table.”**

Our translation states that Lazarus was “laid” at the rich man’s gate. That’s too gentle. The verb is closer to “dumped” or “dropped.” The idea was to move undesirable people like Lazarus from the main roads and dump them somewhere less visible where they might still receive help. Like the gate of a rich man’s house. But not this rich man. He offers no help. He lives for his wealth, instead of using his wealth to serve God and neighbor. He lives the life of a man without faith in God.

But Lazarus is different. He is hungry enough that he craves food that has fallen on the ground. It is unlikely that he is able to walk, which is he begs for a living and has been dropped at the rich man’s gate. He is covered with sores. **“Besides this, the dogs also came and licked his sores.”** The original language reveals the sores are open and ulcerous. Feral dogs come and lick them. There is disagreement about whether

these dogs were a source of comfort or annoyance. This arguing is wasted time. Whether he welcomes the dogs or is simply too weak to shoo them away, the important point is that they are the only creatures in this world who will come near him.

But Lazarus trusts in God. His name means “God helps.” And Lazarus lives in that truth. He trusts that God is his help. He waits patiently for God’s help, trusting that it will arrive. Because he trusts God to help him, Lazarus does not complain. He does not steal. He waits. He trusts. He longs to be filled. The rich man won’t fill him. But he believes God will. God is his help.

I remember hearing this story often called “The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus.” Note how many times Jesus calls Lazarus poor: none. Because Lazarus trusts God to help him, to fill him in the end. And God helps. **“Eventually the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.** No burial for Lazarus’ body is mentioned. But he’s passed the point of caring. The angels carry his soul to Abraham, literally “to Abraham’s bosom.” This is the phrase the Jews of Jesus’ day used to picture the glory of heaven. Abraham, whom God counted righteous through faith, stands at the head of heaven to receive all those believe.

God helps. Lazarus believed that. And the Lord did not let him down. As Abraham will say later: **“But now he is comforted here.”** In the end, God helps all who trust in his promises.

Meanwhile, the rich man’s time with his wealth runs out. **“The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus at his side.”** The wealth that the rich man lived for and served buys him a dignified burial. But that’s the final help it gives him. He lived without trust in God, so he spends eternity without God’s help. He is separated from God eternally.

Lazarus: God helps. So we pray: God, help us. God, forgive us. Forgive us for the times we have thought and lived like the rich man. Forgive us for serving our wealth instead of using our wealth to serve you and our neighbors. And Lord, help us be like Lazarus. Make us people who trust in you to fill us every good thing for eternity. Make us people who wait for your eternal help with patient faith. And as you did for Lazarus, keep your promise to us. Give us your eternal help. Bring us into the embrace of Abraham and the faithful in heaven, all those who trusted you to help them.

And so the curtain drops on Acts One. Now Act Two. Here God helps again. Here God supplies us with what we need to trust him for heaven, and to wait for his eternal help. **“[The rich man] called out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in misery in this flame.’”** Would you say the rich man is sorry now? In a sense, you could say he is. But notice, his primary concern is still for himself – his own relief, his own comfort. It is too late now for his heart to change. Eventually he will get around to caring about his brothers. But even in hell, it’s still him first.

“But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus received his bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in misery. Besides all this, a great chasm has been set in place between you and us, so that those who want to cross from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’” God has flipped the script in the most striking way. The beggar who looked to him for help has received the highest help for eternity. And the rich who did not has received misery for eternity.

But the rich man does not understand. It is too late for him to repent – to turn and look to God for help. But he has five brothers who are still alive. For them, it's not too late. And he cares about them. He does want them to repent and trust in God for help. But he does not understand how God moves hearts to trust in him for eternal help.

“He said, ‘I beg you, father, send [Lazarus] to my father’s home, because I have five brothers – to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’” Yes! That's the ticket! Wow my brothers into believing! Send a man back from the dead to warn them, and then they will repent! Then they will turn to God for help.

But Abraham understands how God helps people by working faith: **“Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’”** Without God's work, no sinner can repent and come to faith. We need God to work faith in us. And he does not do it with eye-popping signs and wonders. He does it with his Word.

It is in his Word that God shows us the whole story of his help for sinners. Without God's Word, we see pain and suffering and death in our world. But in his Word, God tells us why: we are fallen, sinful creatures who have cracked his creation. When we die, we get the wages of our sin. That may not sound like a very helpful thing to tell us, but it is! If you don't know that you're sinful and need God's eternal help, you'll never look to him for that help you need.

And in his Word, God also tells you about his eternal help. He speaks his love for the world, and how he proved that love by sending his Son. Jesus is God's help. He is the righteousness of God, the holiness we need to enter Abraham's embrace. There is no higher help than supplying sinners with the robe of righteousness they need to enter heaven! He takes the sin of the world on his back. There is no higher help than climbing Calvary to die in the place of every sinner, to suffer hell himself to save them from it! He even conquers death for us. So will raise both those buried in fine linen and those in unmarked graves. This is the eternal help of Jesus Christ that we find in God's Word.

“No, father Abraham, he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’” The rich man thinks the way a lot of people do. The Word of God is just words, whatever they may say. Words aren't going to help. They're not going to change peoples' minds and hearts to trust in God for eternal help. No, we need miracles. We need visions. We need something that grab peoples' attention. That will help!

No, Abraham says, it won't. **“Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”** And Abraham is right. No visible wonder or physical miracle will ever work repentance in an unbelieving heart. Not even a resurrection. Jesus proved Abraham right. Just before he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus did raise a man from the dead. (A man named Lazarus, appropriately enough.) Many unbelievers saw him do it. They could not deny that he did it. And what did they say? Did they say, “Oh, my goodness! He was right all along! He really is the Son of God! Let's repent! Let's turn to God for eternal help in him!” No. And even when Jesus himself rose, they still did not believe.

The Word teaches us God's eternal help in Christ. And the Word is God's help to create faith in our hearts. He does not work faith through eye-popping power or amazing displays. God works through his Word to raise up faith in unbelieving hearts.

And so we pray: God, help us. Forgive us for any thinking like the rich man, that you should work faith through shows of wonder and force – and that if only you did, then more would believe. God, help us. Help us look to your Word alone to find the eternal help that you have sent us in your Son, Jesus. And God, help us. Through your Word, work and strengthen the faith in our hearts. Help us. Give us faith like Lazarus, that waits for your eternal help. Help us, God. Help us to wait and trust for you to fill us with good things.

God helps. As he helped Lazarus, he helps all those who trust in him and patiently wait for his salvation. God helps. He helps us for eternity in the saving work of his Son. God helps. He uses his Word to turn hearts to him, to be fill us with good things in heavenly embrace.

Thank you, dear God, for all your help. Amen.