

God Writes a Better Ending | Matt. 21:23-32 | Calvary Lutheran, Brookfield | 30 Sep 2023

In the summer of 1914, the Boston Braves earned a nickname in Major League Baseball; fans started calling them the *Miracle Braves*. They started the season 4-22. If you remember, this was the Brewers for a long time. By July, they had solidified their position in last place. In fact, they played an exhibition game that summer against a minor league team from Buffalo, NY and lost 10-2. This was a *Dumb and Dumber* moment for the Braves. You know the movie, I'm sure. The 1994 classic, *Dumb and Dumber*, starring Jim Carey—in which his character, Lloyd Christmas, at a moment of complete desperation says to his buddy, Harry: **“We got no food, we got no jobs, our pets’ heads are falling off!”**

After that embarrassing loss, they went on a tear—an incredible winning streak. By September, they were in first place. They went on to win the pennant and the World Series by sweeping the World Champion Philadelphia A's 4 games to none. They had *no* superstars. They had *no* star hitters. They had *no* special players. They had a couple of has-beens and no-names. ***No one on that team was special in the way our world would define it.*** Manager George Stallings said, “Give me a ball club of only mediocre ability, and if I can get the players in the right frame of mind, they'll beat the World Champions.” That's exactly what they did.

See—the 1914 Boston Braves did something others didn't. Something *shifted* in how they saw themselves and the game they played. After that *Dumb and Dumber* moment, they turned completely in a *new direction*. According to Stallings, they *changed* their frame of mind. **One might even say they repented from a terrible beginning**—which is what that term *repentance* means. *It is to turn, to change direction, to re-orient your heart toward something new.*

The misfits of this world, the morally questionable, the decisively unspecial—the broken-hearted and the empty-handed ... have always been drawn to Jesus Christ. *Why?* Because people who are hurting and hard-hit by the world are looking for a *new direction*. ***They're looking for a better story than the one they wrote for themselves.*** And the poor, the prostitute, the broken-hearted—because of social realities often beyond their control—they've lived in the trenches of bad beginnings. And they want a different story—and they're not too proud to jump on it when they see it. See, they know—with this Jesus—No matter how bad your beginning, ***God writes a better ending.*** No matter how off course you wander in this life—God will get you home.

But what does that mean for them? It means laying down the authorship over their own story. Laying down the pen, as it were. Laying down rights to the ending. It's saying to God, you write my story—I'm yours. ***He is the author and perfecter of our faith.***

Historically, the people who have had the most trouble doing that are people like me—religious professionals. When God does something new, it's the religious people, ironically, who have the most trouble making that *turn*—reorienting themselves away from the old toward life-giving newness. Why? Because there is comfort and predictability in being a religious professional. I heard someone say, you will always be gainfully employed as an Army chaplain—because young soldiers are *always* doing questionable things, and they come to you after they get caught. Total job security.

In our passage today, Jesus Christ looks directly into the eyes of the religious professionals of his day and tells them—The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. Collaborators with Rome and sex workers. The equivalent today might be identify thieves, people in the pornography industry, predatory lenders, addicts of various kinds... Jesus says, those people are *my* people. Why? **They took my hand. Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest—they took me at my word. Faith in the purest sense. Simple trust. My hand was open to them and they took it.** They wanted a better ending. They longed for a better story. They weren't too proud to be *rescued*.

I was just in NYC for the first time a couple weekends ago. If you haven't seen the 9/11 memorial—and gone through the tour at the museum—please do. I cried through the whole thing. But there have been massive floods this week in New York City and New Jersey. And there's a video of a guy trapped in his car—and a firefighter trudges through the waste high water—and literally picks up the full grown man and lays him across his shoulders—and walks out of the water with him. A full grown man being carried. One might say, how humiliating, how embarrassing... you know how us guys are. Not a good look. He wasn't too proud to be *rescued*. He wasn't too proud to be *carried* to safety.

I met a patient this week in the ICU. He told me straight up—he said, I want you put my story in a sermon. I've been a chaplain in hospital settings for 8 years, and I think that's happened only three or four times. He was raised in the Lutheran church. After he graduated highschool, he was pleasantly neutral about faith—he did believe, went to church now and then, generally lived life as an upstanding citizen, provided for his family—he was a religious person. A couple weeks ago his health took a turn—and he doesn't know how much time he might have. And he told me something remarkable a few days ago, with his wife and family around him—he said, “I should've done this a long time ago, but I've been praying constantly. I've been crying out to God. He hasn't answered my prayer yet in the way I want. But I want people to know—***I'm being carried. I'm being carried, and in the end, I'm going to give God a big hug.***” That's the gospel. Full grown man. Big guy. Crying in a hospital bed. Not afraid of being *carried*. **If that's not the turning, the repentance, the re-orientation Jesus is talking about in this passage, then I don't know what is.**

Hurting people don't often hesitate when Jesus reaches out that hand. *They want a new story.*

Comfortable people hesitate. Religious professionals hesitate. Self-satisfied people hesitate. They like the story they've written—it's predictable and controlled.

After everything they saw Jesus doing—restoring the lives of the broken, cleansing the temple, teaching with complete boldness and humility—even the little children are crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Which, of course, was a messianic title. After all of that, the pastors of his day ask him, ***“Who do you think you are?”*** Where do you get this authority?

You might imagine Jesus almost smiling—and saying to them—**Listen, this is the moment.** This is where the rubber hits the road. This is your Dumb and Dumber moment. Right now, it's time to turn. Now is the moment to drop the pen. Now is the moment to say I want a new story—no matter how uncomfortable it might be. **And the religious professionals *can't* do it.**

Tim Keller says the frightening thing about being saved completely by grace—and not by works—is that *there's nothing God cannot ask of us*. That means we drop the authorship over our own lives—we turn completely toward him in his love, and *he writes the story*. That's scary, isn't it? God writes the story.

He will put people in our lives that drive us nuts; he'll put us in situations we could not imagine; he'll shape us in ways we've never planned. **He won't protect us from pain. He won't protect us from rejection. He'll give us a *big life* that matters.** He'll give us a *new* story. One we couldn't have written for ourselves. **Gerard Manley Hopkins** was an Jesuit priest and poet—he died at 45 of typhoid. His last words were, “I am so happy. I am so happy. I loved my life.” He didn't write his own story—he let go of being the author. It doesn't mean he didn't suffer. He did. ***But he knew the one who carried him.*** He knew that wounded hand that held him. He wasn't afraid to be rescued.

That's what the tax collectors and the prostitutes are after. Redemption in the purest sense. They drop the rights over their own story. They jump on that outstretched hand. And Jesus says, ***those are my people.***

Look, there are things in this life that we have broken—aren't there? Do you know what I mean? There are moments we can't get back. Broken relationships. Hurt feelings. Missed opportunities. If you live in the world, you will break things—and you will experience brokenness. One day—when I was a toddler, I pushed a kitchen chair up to the fridge, opened the door, and started exploring. When my dad found me, I was trying to put a broken egg back together. Yolk running down my arm. Balling my eyes out. ***My first lesson on what it means to be human.*** We break things we cannot fix—and some of us spend our lives punishing ourselves.

And all the while there is an outstretched hand that says, join the club. You're broken. Take my hand. The tax collectors and prostitutes did. ***Now is the moment.***

See, there was One who came into our brokenness. In fact, he didn't just enter our broken world, *he was broken for us*. He entered *our* story of pain, rejection, violence, hostility—our story that was undoubtedly headed toward a terrible ending. On the cross, Jesus Christ re-wrote the story. He entered into our bad beginnings—took all of our sin and rejection upon himself, in his own body and soul—and gave us a beautiful ending we cannot lose: ***life with him.***

The lives he writes for us will not be pain-free. They will not be easy. **But they will be *with him*, and he will carry us. Don't be afraid to be carried. Don't be afraid to be rescued.** He is the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end—the author and perfecter of our faith. Drop the pen of your life. Give it to him. His wounded hand is open to us. It's right here, right now—always. **No matter how bad your beginning—God writes a better ending. No matter how off course you wander in this life—God will get you home.** Amen.