

## Our Stories May 19, 2024

**Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church**

**Pastor John Scott**

Here we are, getting close to the end of our series, *Loved & Sent*, and it just so happens that Pentecost falls right in the middle of it, as we talk about how we go into the world with the love of Jesus on this day when the Spirit comes, descends upon His people, and sends them into the world with the greatest message of hope, peace, and love in the entire world--the greatest message of reconciliation, of all the big church words that you have heard, such as justification, sanctification, reconciliation, all of those things wrapped up in the Spirit who comes to each and every one of us to empower us, to encourage us that we might know Jesus more fully and be able to share that with the world. Truly, we are loved, and we are sent, and the Spirit is with us testifying to that each and every day. Amen.

So today, we talk about our stories. We talk about how God has worked in our lives in such a way that it helps the world see him more clearly. Our stories are important to us in the ways that we have seen the world. And so today when we think about this, what are the stories that you tell yourself? The stories that live just between your two ears, what are the stories that you live with? What is the story that you tell about yourself to yourself? What are the stories that you tell about the people around you that only exist in your mind? What's the story you tell about the world? Do you feel that the world is mostly evil or mostly good? Those are very different stories. Each of us lives with a whole set of stories that only exist to us, that we only hear, that we only see, that we only rumble around these stories that wake us up at 2 a.m., the stories that live with us when we celebrate, the stories that we tell our kids and our grandkids about our lives and about the people that have come before us. These stories are foundational for who we think that we are.

Some of the stories that we tell are not just about the people around us, but they are also about our relationship with God. See, just like Mr. Ray said earlier in the children's message, at this time as a child when he was asked

to come and confront kind of who he was and how sorry he was, that process of doing that over and over and over again caused him to tell a story. And the story started with, “*If I just.*” Like, maybe there was this thought of, “If I just do what I’m supposed to do during the weekend and not get in trouble, then I will not have to go forward and confess and say I’m sorry again.” Have any of you ever been there before? Maybe it is a story that you tell, “If I just show a little bit more kindness to the people around me...if I just work a little bit harder...if...if I just...”

When it comes to God, “If I just read my Bible a little bit more...If I just get up early enough to make it on time to 8 o’clock church every single week...” There are so many “*If I just*” moments and thoughts in our heads that sometimes it causes us to think that we will never measure up.

The “*If I just*” starts to bury us. They make us worry. They give us anxiety. They cause us to wake up in the middle of the night not knowing if God would truly. Today I hope that you hear the antidote to this, that the *if-I-just*’s have a very clear answer. And this answer is not, “You are perfect.” The answer is not that all that will go away.

The answer is simply that your story does not begin with you. Your stories, all those stories you tell about yourself, do not start with you. What God has done for you is that He has given you a story. He has started this story for you—“In the beginning was the word.” We heard this in our text today. In the beginning, at the very beginning of all things, was not just God the Creator, but was Jesus the Word. When God spoke things into existence, His speaking, His mere act of speaking, created them all. And He did this through the one who speaks to you today, who says, “I have loved you, I have given myself for you, I have been raised from the dead just for you.” And this Word, this Jesus, was not just some ethereal thing. Jesus became flesh. And when we take that into consideration, when we know that, we know that this enfleshment of Jesus means that He knows our stories. The ones that we tell that only exist in our head, He knows those temptations. He knows the things that we are tempted to think about ourselves and others.

He has been there. But in the middle of that, in the middle of our death, in the middle of our brokenness, He makes us alive. You see, this is where your story begins. Your story begins with who God says that you are. And during this series, we have been going back to this again and again and again because we need to. Because every single week there are things that happen in our lives and in the world that remind us of just how broken we are, how imperfect we are, and how many *If-I-just's* we really do have. So, to come back each and every time and see that our story is rooted in His story, that who we think about ourselves is truly based on what He thinks of us, and to hear that this God who created all things has done so and loves us and sacrifices what He values most to bring us back to Him. This is His story, and this is a story that we live each and every day. It changes our *if-I-just's* into *Because-He-did*. It takes the focus off of us and off of all the ways that we fall short, and it turns our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to Him and Him alone.

And we see that He has created us, that He has saved us, and that He is present with us, reminding us of that each and every day. So often we focus on the creation aspect; we see it around us. We focus on the salvation aspect, which is Jesus dying and rising for us, but the presence of this incredible God with us each and every day, reminding us of His great love, that's the Spirit is work in us—this same Spirit that came to the disciples so long ago in Jerusalem and caused them to speak in languages they did not even know so that all of the people around them would know of God's great love—that Spirit is working in you today.

Today, it is reminding you that He is the one who brings you back to God. No longer is it *If-I-just*; lay that aside, focus on what He has done. He has brought you back to Himself. Our God is a God of stories. He is a God of stories that counter the broken ones that we leave between our ears. He counters these by reminding us that He makes stories. He's a story changer, and He's a story-keeper.

He does this in some pretty specific ways. In this book, *Loved & Sent*, Pastor Cloeter talks about these through three key things: Grace, Sacraments, and Church.

The first piece is Grace. Do you remember what Grace's acronym is? We talk about this here and there. This is kind of my thing. Grace is an acronym. It stands for *God's Riches at Christ's Expense*. Have you ever heard that before? That is foundational. Let's build that into who we are.

*God's Riches at Christ's Expense*. God gives us the riches of new life today and forever because of what Jesus has done. We see in our readings today: God gives us grace upon grace from who He is and how He loves us. Can we count the grace that we have received? Can we add it up and see if it is enough to bring us back to God?

There is no need. It is in full all of the time. No longer do you need to worry about how connected you are with God. The Spirit reminds each and every one of us that His grace is full for you every single day. This grace then reminds us that we are saved through faith alone. It is not through what we do. It is not through what we could do. It is not through our possibilities or our potential. It is through what God has done, and He gives it to us as a gift. This gift is incredible. We receive it at our baptisms, and we know that it is not us who works in it, but it is God Himself, so that whatever we do, whatever richness and riches that we receive, it is all His that He blesses us with.

The focus then shifts. With this grace, with this gift, how do we really know and understand how God makes our story today and how He changes who we are? Well, He changes us through His sacraments. We have a couple of sacraments here—baptism and communion. These are the two ways that we know that we experience God's grace right here. It is where creation, where the physicalness of creation and the spiritual world come together and give us the goodness of God's gifts. This is the key. This is "and the word became flesh." Why did Jesus have to become human? It is a great question, but it is this constant story that God tells of how much He loves His creation, how much He wants all of creation, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth, to be united. And in these sacraments, in the water, in the bread, in the wine, these are all connected with things that are real, but in the spiritual world, in God's kingdom, with the promise, with Christ's body, with Christ's blood.

And in this, we know and are encouraged from Ephesians 2, that we are His masterpieces. We are created new each and every day in Christ Jesus. With this constant remaking of ourselves, God changes our story daily by remaking us through whom He blesses us with and through these sacraments. Wow. Every time we eat, every time we drink, every time we remember that we are baptized, He makes us new.

Finally, God is a story-maker. He's a story-changer. And the last thing is that He encourages us through the church. What is the church all about? "From His fullness, we have all received..." Wait, what, who has received? All. There is no difference between Lutherans and all of the other Christians, name your favorites; we have all received His grace. We have all received Him. The Spirit has been present in all of us so that we might reflect His goodness. This is a gift. And so, we do not boast in it. We do not boast of our, well, whatever it might be. And so, we always point to Him.

This is the picture of the church that really starts to come out on Pentecost, that no matter all these people sitting around with different gifts, with different abilities, some were more respected, some were less respected, but the Spirit comes to each of them. And through each of them, through its gifts, sends them into the world with the grace of God that will bring connection and salvation.

You see, our God makes our stories from the beginning. He changes them each and every day, every time we come together. And He keeps that story through us, through the Spirit is presence in us and through others. So the church, in the end, is not a what, a where, or a how, but the church is you. The church is you. The church is the people in whom the Spirit rests. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, the Spirit is with us to help us see His goodness.

Here are a couple of stories of what's been going on around here lately. First of which is, we officially received the acceptance from the seminary that Mr. Ray is now going to take some new classes. He's embarking on a new journey to become a pastor, and we are very excited for that. Gilbert

Kijuna is doing the same thing, and we'll celebrate that next week when he's with us. We are excited for that next step in a journey, but there are so many next steps that we all take. This is Olivia and Isaac from last week. We baptized them right here at our font at 9:30 a.m. And there were so many people in their lives that brought their parents and them together to see the goodness of God, to experience it, to know that they are loved, and to bring them to the saving waters of baptism. All of you played a part in that. All of you played a part in that.

And we have Amos the Comfort Dog, of course, the one thing that may replace pastors one day. Amos is fantastic. Amos opens up doors that I could never open up, doors to healing and to hope in Jesus' name. And in this way, we are able to go into places and share Jesus' love and Jesus' hope, and you all are part of that.

This is, this is what we do together as a church. We go. We are sent with the Spirit is love.

In addition, we support Dr. Franco, and he's the one who leads this ministry called Go-Haiti that you have been a part of for so long in Haiti which is so full of chaos right now. We are in a small way, through the power of the Spirit, helping bring hope to people in Jesus' name, right there where they need it.

Our stories are not limited by what exists between our ears. Our stories are not limited by the broken stories we tell about ourselves. Our stories are wrapped up and started in God's story, and how He is using each and every one of us through His Spirit to share His love with the world. And when we do that together as the church, I mean, countless, countless people see Jesus for who He is, their Savior, the one that loves them, and the one that through the Spirit is with them each and every day. We do not exist for ourselves. And as soon as we realize that, our story is not about us. It does not begin with us, but it starts with God. And it is all about Him. We start to see the incredible things that He does, and the power that He makes real through His people.

This is something to celebrate. May we continue to know that we are loved, and we are sent. May we continue to know that we are here for the world, to help people see what God has shown us, that we are truly loved, and that this connection that we so greatly desire. It is a gift, and it is for all of us.

Let's close with a word of prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for being with us today, for leading us and guiding us, for sending your Spirit to be a part of us now.

From our baptisms, you have given us the Spirit in a new way, and each and every day you call us back to yourselves. Replace the stories in our minds that speak of our brokenness and replace them with your goodness. Transform us so that we might be your hands and feet each and every day. When we fail, Lord, let us ask for forgiveness, but Lord, when we see you at work, let us celebrate with joy.

In all of this, encourage each and every one of us to know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, the people that you have called together, your church, right here, right now, for the people who are around us, right here, right now.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.