

## The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke

### Part 26: Bridging Hell

Countryside Community Church

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Easter Sunday

**Scripture: Luke 3:1-6; 24:1-12, 36-53**

Founding father and renowned polymath, Benjamin Franklin, once observed that, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” I’m guessing this assertion was made tongue-in-cheek, or perhaps stein-in-hand, but it does raise an important question: How do we actually know that God loves us and wants us to be happy?

If you just look at the way the world works, with its never-ending thirst for warfare, bloodshed and violence, Franklin’s assumption about wanting us to be happy seems to be a bit optimistic. And if we look at the world’s incessant pride, envy, greed, and self-righteous indignation toward others that always seems to provide us justification for inflicting harm on them, one might think Franklin’s assumption about God loving us is the epitome of wishful thinking. If God is a God of justice, then it may be safer to conclude that God is deeply disappointed with us and wants to punish us for our sin.

No, if God truly “loves us and wants us to be happy,” then this could only be the case if God actively chooses relationship over perfection. Loving us in the state we’re in could only happen if God prefers to dwell in the muck and the mire of everyday life with us, rather than sitting enthroned in some perfect paradise waiting for us to finally get our act together before embracing us. And since we ourselves can’t even do that with people we “vaguely dislike,” let alone our sworn enemies, God would have to be very – very – different from us. In fact, God would have to be ... well ... *God!*

What proof do we have – besides beer?

For me, I’ll look for proof not in beer but in baptism. I won’t end with baptism, but that’s where I’ll start. On the first Sunday of our series, we started with Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Luke tells us that John’s baptism was for “repentance and the forgiveness of sin.” This is Luke’s way of claiming that John’s baptism was an affirmation of “God’s preference of relationship over perfection.” Let’s take a moment to look more closely at the words.

What is “sin”? In the New Testament, sin is *hamartia* in Greek (pronounced ha-mar-TEE-uh). *Hamartia* is actually a term from archery. It literally means “to miss the mark.” So to sin is to move in a certain direction in life that is not ultimately toward “the mark,”

or God. Usually, it seems, we're moving in the exact opposite direction as God. We're hating our enemies when we should be loving them; we're hoarding our resources when we should be sharing them.

When the Jews of John the Baptist's day walked into the Jordan River, they didn't just dip their toes in. They went all the way in and dropped to their knees so that the waters washed over them. A full immersion. What this symbolized is the reality that whenever we head in the opposite direction of God, life becomes unlivable. We're "in over our heads." And if no one is there to intercede on our behalf, we drown.

Yet in the waters of baptism – the waters of *drowning* – those who entered the Jordan River were grasped under the water by powerful arms and raised to the surface. What this symbolized is how we encounter God when all hope is lost. We encounter God not as a Presence who is so angry over our sin that God holds our heads under the water, but a God who chooses relationship over perfection; who loves us even when we have wandered so far from God that we're in over our heads and can't escape; a God whose love for us does not depend on who we are and what we've done but who God is, and what God does.

The Sufi mystic Rumi knew such a God whose love is independent of our actions. He wrote of his experience, giving voice to God's message to each one of us: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make any sense."

When we meet God in this kind of field, experiencing a love that is neither justifiable nor needs justification; a love that simply "is"; a love that believes in us more than we could ever believe in us ... when we meet this God, there is nothing we want more than to be with this God always. We will move in any direction, cross any mountain, and ford any river to stand in this field with this Love.

In the Bible one of the meanings of "repentance" is to "turn around." In the Jordan River, those who were raised from the waters were then turned around so that they could move in the direction of life, not death. Every step they took from then on was with the realization that whenever they missed the mark in the future, they need not run from God, but rather turn toward God calling out for help. This, so that they might be turned in the direction of Life.

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is, he said there are two. The first is to "love the Lord your God with heart, mind, soul, and strength." The other is to "love your neighbor as yourself." "On these two commandments," said Jesus, "depend all the Law and the Prophets." Simultaneous love of God, neighbor, and self are what happens to any person who meets God in the field beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing; who encounters a love that is neither justifiable nor needs justification; a love that "is" because it cannot be "is not." Love of God, neighbor and self is the surest sign that one has entered the waters of death and been transformed.

The River of Death became for you the River of Life. From that point on, your life bears witness to the fact that “God loves us and wants us to be happy.”

Baptism is the first proof of the veracity of Benjamin Franklin’s assumption of God’s love and intent for us. But there’s a more persuasive sign even than this. It’s not only persuasive, but it shows that Franklin got it only partly right. The truth is much better than Franklin imagined. The truth is that “God loves us and wants us to be not just happy, but *joyous!*”

I find proof of this reality in the experience of Holy Week and Easter. On Maundy Thursday, I find Jesus sitting at a Passover Seder with his disciples, acknowledging that he will be betrayed and placed into the hands of those who acknowledge neither his kingship nor his priesthood. In response to the world’s betrayal, Jesus fundamentally turns Passover on its head. Instead of serving lamb and painting the doorposts and lintels with its blood as a sign of God’s protection of the innocent and wrath against the guilty, Jesus serves himself as the Passover Lamb. On Good Friday, the guilty will slaughter Jesus, the new Passover Lamb – a sign that God will pass over not just the innocent, but the very people who have committed the most grievous sin ever committed by the human race: killing God’s very Anointed. And I hear Jesus, fully in Passover Lamb mode, asking God to “forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”

On Good Friday, it is as if the entirety of humanity had walked so far in the opposite direction of God that we were all in over our heads, drowning in a mighty and chaotic river.

And then on Easter Sunday, I discover that all is not lost. Jesus has joined us under that river of our drowning. Joined us, and raised us up to behold the world anew ... or is it a New World? God has truly “passed over” the guilty and innocent alike, meeting us all on that “field beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing” where “the world is too full to talk about ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense.”

In Jesus’ raising we are raised, and all who realize what has just happened ... well, all we want to do is be where our Lord is. We will turn in any direction he sets us, crossing any mountain, fording any river just to experience the embrace of this overwhelming Love.

And what is the direction in which Jesus sets us? The resurrected Jesus tells us exactly where to head in Luke’s gospel: he tells us to go forth proclaiming “repentance and forgiveness of sins” – proclaiming God’s love and grace that embraces us when we turn toward God and sets our lives moving in the right direction – starting in Jerusalem then proclaiming the good news to all nations. It is the very message of John the Baptist in his baptism. Only now we are not only baptized with water, but with the Holy Spirit – the surest proof that “God loves us and wants us to not just be happy, but filled with *joy.*”

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed.

May you be filled with Easter joy!