

January 14th: Dig

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Let’s pray together and seek God’s presence before we begin.

Jesus Our Healer, there are a lot of things in our lives right now that make us feel desperate to be close to you—so we enter this time of reflection ready to be in your presence. We come with anxieties to be comforted, frustrations to be heard, situations to be fixed, and broken hearts to be soothed, so we turn to you with anticipation. Draw near to us now, and touch us with your healing hand, we pray. Amen.

Maybe this is a little bit of a spoiler alert, but I want to let you know right off the bat that today's meditation is not necessarily an upbeat one—I don't think I have any jokes for you, or any pithy comments like I usually try to include—and that is because today's text focuses on an unusual scene, with an deeply emotional foundation. And the difficult emotion that I want us to focus on this morning is desperation. Desperation is not a happy emotion, or a particularly uplifting experience, as maybe some of you can attest, but I think the desperation in this specific story has a lot to teach us if we're willing to listen.

But first, let's recap just a little bit of our entry into the New Testament—which is the later half of our Bible that is written from the perspective of the 1st century CE.

Last week we focused on a scene from the Gospel of Mark where Jesus begins to call his disciples, the people who will be his followers as he begins his ministry. We talked about how this act of following Jesus is not a passive process, but an active one, requiring active trust, movement, and commitment.

Today we continue our adventure into the life of Jesus, and we heard a story from one of his first public encounters. From the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his new followers immediately begin to travel, heading to the city of Capernaum. Capernaum was a city near to where Jesus had grown up, so the word begins to spread that he has come home. Chapter 2 verse 2 tells us that this caused quite a stir—"They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them." So Jesus' audience for preaching and teaching has already grown beyond just his band of disciples—if this is opening night, he's already in front of a packed house.

This causes a slight issue for some people who are trying to join the party—because there's no room for them in the house itself. Our story continues, "Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on."

Can you picture this happening? Can you imagine a house full of people listening to Jesus, and then suddenly, a man on a stretcher is lowered down into the room through a hole in the ceiling? What would your first reaction have been to this strange scene? What would you do if someone fell through our roof right now while I'm speaking? I'm not Jesus so what I'm saying is probably not nearly as profound as what he was sharing, but it would still be quite a disruption, don't you think?

But instead of being angry, or frustrated by this interruption, or distracted by the gaping hole in the roof, Jesus looks at the paralyzed man and sees exactly why this bold action needed to be taken to get his attention. Mark records for us this interaction between Jesus and these men: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'"

However, this isn't the end of the story—because the crowd that is gathered in the house has some thoughts about what has just happened! Even more so than a man being lowered from the ceiling, this statement by Jesus causes a moment of confusion and conflict. In particular, we hear that some of the religious elite that have come to listen to Jesus are not big fans of what Jesus has just said. Beginning in verse 6, we read, "Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'"

Jesus is quick to respond, and we hear this from our gospel writer:

"Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.'"

So in just a few sentences, in one of his very first public appearances, in one of his very first teachings, Jesus sets out a decidedly bold claim: he is the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Savior of God's people. And while this is maybe not the most easy way to go about gathering disciples and leading a brand new movement—I give him major points for courage. But even more than courage,

Jesus has real power to back up his claims. Our passage for today concludes with this incredible result: “So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

I don't want to minimize how incredible this is, because Jesus does in fact perform a miracle here, but I want to highlight that none of this would have happened if those men didn't get up on the roof in the first place. None of this would have been possible if these friends had not lowered this paralyzed person into Jesus' sight. This miracle is able to occur because they decided to do something bold, they had the desperation to do something disruptive, and they believed so much in what they were doing that they were willing to do whatever it took. They were willing to dig through a ceiling to make sure that their friend was seen and his needs were met.

You might be asking yourself: where does that leave us? How can this ancient story apply to our modern day lives? Certainly we don't have Jesus here with us today, and we don't have anyone falling through our ceiling, so what wisdom does this scene have for us?

Well, as you might be able to tell, based on our sermon title, our verb for this morning that I want us to reflect on together is: to dig. And that might seem like a strange verb to choose, but I promise to explain.

Wherever you are in your spiritual journey this morning, I want you to pause for a second and think about that one thing or the biggest thing that you're desperate for right now. If something doesn't immediately come to mind, that's okay, but I want you to take a few moments now to dig a little deeper, dig beneath your surface thoughts or emotions, dig into your recurring patterns and behavior, to see if you can identify something that is motivating you right now. Maybe you've never thought about yourself as having a sense of desperation in your life, maybe you've never used the word “desperate” to describe your actions, but I want to invite you in this space to think about your daily routine, or your ongoing stressors, or your plans for the future—what

would you do anything for? What would you give up time, energy, or resources to achieve?

You might have to dig deeper than you feel comfortable doing right this minute, so feel free to take those questions home with you for your own personal reflection or prayer time. Take some time this week to dig into them when you're feeling stuck, or feeling anxious, or are going through a difficult time.

Maybe you'll discover that you're desperate for a better job, because the one you have now is draining the life out of you.

Maybe you'll find that you're desperate for wisdom about a particular situation that is making you anxious.

Maybe you're desperate for clarity around a decision that you need to make but don't quite feel ready to yet.

Maybe you're desperate for better health, because you've been sick recently, or are dealing with a condition that leaves you unable to do all the things you want to do.

Maybe you're desperate for a break—for just a few hours alone to sit and drink a hot cup of coffee and relax.

Maybe you're desperate for connection—you've been feeling lonely and distant from your friends and family.

Maybe you're desperate for a stronger financial foundation, and you're struggling to figure out how you're gonna make it happen.

Maybe you're desperate for comfort, because you're feeling sad or depressed. Maybe you're desperate for a hug, because it's been a while since someone wrapped their arms around you and told you that you were safe.

Maybe you're desperate for resolution to a conflict that's causing some pain or frustration in your life.

Maybe you're desperate for a fresh start, but you feel trapped by your circumstances.

Maybe you're desperate for a sense of control, when your world feels like it's spinning.

Maybe you're desperate for healing, are longing for wholeness and peace.

Or maybe if you're not feeling personally desperate in this week or this season of your life, you can dig a little deeper into our collective psyche, and come up with something that our community, or our nation, or our world is desperate for right now. If you dig into our collective relationships, our collective conflicts, our collective emotions—is there something that our society is desperate for as a whole? Is there something or some idea that we all would do anything to make happen?

Maybe you'll identify that our culture right now is desperate for meaning and purpose and that our attempts to fill that need with mindless consumerism just end up leaving us feeling worse.

Maybe you'll identify that our culture in 2024 is desperate for a better future, but instead of working towards unity or a cooperative plan, we splinter into special interest groups that compete for power, which makes us even more in danger of disaster.

Maybe you'll identify that our world is desperate for a more sustainable environment because we've destroyed the natural beauty and open spaces that used to exist.

I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture. Dig deep to find it, dig deep to be able to name that desperation. Dig deep to find that idea or that concept or that thing that we would risk it all for.

And then, when you've reflected and found something inside of you or inside of all of us—dig just a little deeper. Dig through whatever ceiling or roof is standing in your way. Dig past the shame, or guilt, or fear that is stopping you. Dig past the barriers that are preventing us from moving forward. Dig past the

obstacles that are keeping us from achieving the reality that we all want to believe is possible.

It might have been physically difficult for our ancient friends to dig through a roof, and I won't pretend that this kind of emotional, self-reflective digging will be easy work, but I promise that it does pay off.

The paralyzed man who was lowered into the room, desperate for healing, ends up being able to walk away from this story in full view of everyone. A miracle has happened here: he takes his mat and goes home on his own two feet. And the crowd that is watching says, "We have never seen anything like this!"

When we bring our own desperation, either personal or collective, to Jesus—we discover that he sees it, and he sees our faith. When we lay it before him, he doesn't just make a claim about power, he demonstrates his power. When we come to Jesus at our most vulnerable, and with open hearts, we might find that miracles are not just a thing of the past, but very much possible here and now.

And we might also walk away from our encounter saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

May it be so, my friends, may it be so.

Amen.