**Joy Comes in the Morning**

February 15, 2025

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Sixth Week of Epiphany and St. Valentine’s

*“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It’s not like that here. Here he’s consoled and you’re tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross [[1]](#footnote-1)over from you to us.”* Luke 16:25-26

 Who watched the Superbowl last Sunday? Please give me a show of hands. Even if you are not a football fan, and I am not a sports fan at all, I watch the Superbowl. I mean when else do I serve the entire dinner in front of the tv and queso and homemade chips qualify as dinner? I am all in for the expensive ads, Taylor Swift sightings and the halftime show. Now, I knew I should be expecting something great from Kendrick Lamar because our own Lily Codjoe told me how excited she was to see him perform and my son Camden was pumped. By the time the halftime show opened, I put away my entertainment device, aka my iPhone, and fully committed to watching the show.

 At first, Reed and I were amazed by the setting. What was going on? Was it some kind of video game? I had no idea what the x and o’s were about. The dancers in red, white and blue seemed to resemble the American flag and Kendrick Lamar was the central voice and movement of all the action. Quickly we figured out we had no idea what he was saying, and we don’t know his music, so we turned on closed captioning (thank you for that Diversity Equity and Inclusion Actions for the hearing impaired) and we could read the captions to try to understand what was happening on stage. Thirteen minutes later, I knew I liked it a lot, and I knew I didn’t understand it.

 Our President did not like the message. He left the stadium, hopped on AirForce 1 and missed the second half of the game.

 The next morning, the media and social media were blowing up with commentaries about what happened. Some folks: mainly white folks, hated the music, the dancing, and wished for a better halftime. But the data shows that more folks watched this halftime show than any other show in history. The Data doesn’t lie. Our Executive Minister and a friend of mine, the Rev. Darrell Goodwin who is a Black man and a preacher, had a lot to say about what was going on in Lamar’s show. He said it was a powerful message with hidden messages. First, Samuel Jackson was dressed up as Uncle Tom telling Lamar to settle down and perform for the masses. Second, it was a warning to Kendrick to play the game white America expects. 3) The Squid Game reminds us that rich are exploiting the poor on stage 4) Red, white and blue dancers representing America, what is missing? 5) Setting is a prison yard stage as a reminder of the mass incarceration of Black Americans at a much higher rate than white Americans 6) “They not like us” the title of one of his songs is a reminder to Drake and America that Black culture is real 7) Call to action. Turn off the TV. At the end of the performance the lights lit up over the stadium saying “Game Over” as a bold call to action. Kendrick Lamar told everyone watching to pay attention.  [[2]](#footnote-2)As he said at the beginning of the performance, **“The revolution is about to be televised; you picked the right time but the wrong guy.”[[3]](#footnote-3)**

 These are unusual times we are living in. I cannot pretend that everything is as it was. I believe that real church, real preaching, and authentic living means acknowledging the challenges we are living in. I want to begin with acknowledging that I do not know all the answers. And I know that watching a Pulitzer-prize winning artist like Kendrick Lamar perform at a halftime show, I need to do my research to begin to understand the masterclass he just taught. As white folks, times like this require using our two ears first before opening our mouths and offering our opinions as definitive. And I totally think it’s fine not to like rap music. Steve G. doesn’t really like country music, and I love country. I never really listen to rap music but after watching the Grammys this year and watching Kendrick Lamar at the Superbowl, I realize that I am taking the lazy way out by sticking with my comfortable Brandi Carlisle and Avett Brothers folk radio station designed by Spotify.

 Jesus has a lot to teach us about listening to the “other.” In the Gospel according to Luke, we learn about Luke’s insistence on a “preferential option for the poor.” Enslaved people existed in the time of Jesus and today’s reading comes from the 16th Chapter of the Book of Luke. We remember that Jesus was born poor, in a barn within a backwater town. When Mary, his Jewish mother was pregnant and unmarried, she sang a song of liberation known as the Magnificat where she sang God ““fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty” ([Luke 1:53](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A53&version=NRSV)). It’s Luke who declares that Jesus describes his mission as first and foremost “to bring good news to the poor” — and then later, in the Sermon on the Plain, says both “Blessed are you who are poor” and “Woe to you who are rich” ([Luke 4:16-21; 6:20,24](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+4%3A16-21%3B+6%3A20%2C24&version=NRSV)).

 In fact, this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus can be summarized, the stark contrasts and high stakes of the parable signal that it’s meant to come across as a kind of fable, and at the same time as a vivid, urgent warning. This isn’t a treatise on the afterlife. On the contrary, it’s a graphic morality tale meant to focus our attention, and if necessary, to rouse us from slumber: *Wake up — and listen![[4]](#footnote-4)*

 That introduction to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus sounds an awful lot like a parable or poetic reflection of Kendrick Lamar’s halftime show. It was a story within a story within a story, where lots of folks were getting played, not just a beef with a fellow rapper named Drake, but with a commentary to all Americans about the Black experience and a commentary on what is America. What is the flag? He kept singing “they not like us.”

 Lazarus was not like the rich man. Yes, it is a parable but is also a fact that the rich got richer and the poor lived on the dumped on the doorstep with wounds from malnutrition and ate the scraps off the rich man’s table with the dogs.

 And yet, Lazarus is the only one in the parable who is given a name. The rich man is just that, a rich man. He could be any rich man. Different decade, different time, still it is the story of the rich man living extravagantly with conspicuous consumption. And the poor man, Lazarus, dies an early death because of poverty and greed.

 The story does not end at this death. The story continues to find Lazarus raised to new life and carried by the angels to Father Abraham. And the rich man dies, and he can see that Lazarus is sitting in the lap of Father Abraham enjoying the richness he never received in his mortal time on earth. The rich man begs, “Father Abraham, mercy! Have mercy! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool my tongue. I’m in agony in this fire.” (Luke 16:24) You see, even in the pit of Hades, he still thinks Lazarus is his servant. He can compel him down from Heaven to cool his time in Hell. What hubris! Not even the fires of Hell can shut him up!

 Reed always says his favorite word in the Bible is “but.” Listen here, “But Abraham said, “Child, remember that in your lifetime you got the good things, and Lazarus got the bad things. It’s not like that here. Here he is consoled, and you’re tormented. Besides, in all these matters there is a huge chasm set between us so that no one can go from us to you even if he wanted to, nor can anyone cross over from you to us.” (Luke 16:25-26)

 This is a real warning about how things happen after we die. We may not get our just rewards now, but in the afterlife, evil will be punished and the persecuted, poor and forgotten will be blessed with all they were deprived of on earth.

 I know when I read these parables, I want to be Lazarus and not the rich guy in the story. I certainly don’t want to burn. And I am rarely a fire and brimstone preacher, but this text says, turn or burn.

 We must turn away from hurting those who do not have enough resources. We must feed the hungry. Bringing food in to put in our food pantry bucket is something we should feel compelled to do every week. Making sure that this country has Meals on Wheels for homebound folks and free food for all children in schools matters. Feeding kids in Sudan through USAID matters because those children’s lives matter to God even if we never think about them. Right now, millions of dollars’ worth of aid is sitting and rotting in trucks and in containers as they are not allowed to be given to children who are dying from malnutrition. Right now, Tuberculosis which is treatable has been stopped across the globe because we shut down USAID. Right now, people in Africa who are in the middle of promised treatment for HIV have stopped receiving lifesaving drugs and they will die. Our country, and this is our responsibility as we are the Rich Man, and they are Lazarus, they lay dying.

 And God, God did not say that is good. God tells the story of Father Abraham, the Father to Jews, Muslims and Christians who says, when we harm the poor represented by Lazarus, we will find ourselves in Hades. And that’s Hell. And it is hot there. And no, we can’t go find our brothers and warn them. For the Prophets and Moses have all told us how we are to love and share. And since we did not listen then, will we ever listen.

 As my mother’s folk song goes, “When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?”

 And yet, I will not end this sermon with burning.

 Let us end it with turning. Let us turn, turn, turn until we come around right.

 God is calling us to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

 God is calling us to listen to the poor and then to do something now. While we are alive. It is too easy to say, who am I? What can I do? I am weak, I am tired, I am old. I am just one. I am not political. I am not one to argue.

 You don’t need to argue. You need to let your life be your message as Gandhi said he hoped would be his message. Gandhi embodied his love for his people walking to freedom and to find salt. Fasting to overturn colonial rule of India. But Gandhi could have never done the great Salt March alone. What made it Great was the masses of people dropping everything and walking. And what made his call to use homespun cotton work was the countless women who spun cloth and the men, women and children who chose homespun clothing and traditional Indian dress rather than the clothing of the colonizer.

 Today, I invite you to leave and ask where God is calling you to love your neighbor as yourself. Do we want to end up as the rich man or do we want to share with Lazarus so that his experience of joy comes in the morning while he is still alive on earth rather than joy in the afterlife?

 The phrase "joy comes in the morning" appears in the Bible in Psalm 30:5. The full verse reads, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning".  I pray that we may find joy in the morning, especially as it feels like we are entering into a long, long night. Let us draw together in singing. We have the beautiful song of Jamaican singer Bob Marley to remind us that we are better when we sing together. The birds of the air have no fear. And yet, we know that as humans we are called to accountability. While we may consider the lilies of the field, or watch the beauty of all creation, we must never forget that God created us to be caretakers of this planet. And that means caring first for the most vulnerable.

 Let us live out our mission statements found posted throughout our bulletin.

 Please turn over your bulletin and recite with me our call to Be the Church.



 And let the people say Amen!

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.facebook.com/darrell.goodwin> Feb. 10, 2025 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.buzzfeed.com/karltonjahmal/kendrick-lamar-super-bowl-halftime-show-review [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/9/24/listen-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)