

July 5th Sermon

All Saints Lutheran Church Cowboy Service

Sermon:

Like No Western I Ever Saw

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I love old westerns. I guess there's still a bit of a kid in me that likes a good dust up, a story where there are bad guys, but the good guys win.

Every couple of weeks I like to take a day and get the kitchen dirty baking cookies and treats for the grandchildren. (And some for ourselves). I usually take the better part of a day, so I'll set up my computer in a spot that won't get dusty with flour or spattered by the mixer, and I'll tune in some old westerns. YouTube has a channel they call "the forsaken westerns," usually black and white, old stories with very famous very young actors, stories that often were pilots that never made it to the airwaves, or series that were short-lived.

Anyway, it doesn't take many viewings to realise there are really only five or six basic stories, told in different ways but saying the same thing. You have a hero, a love interest, a problem, and some bad guys. You remember how they are. There are the simple cattleman who ride the range, following their herds looking for pasture and fresh water... but some rich land-owner begins fencing off the land, cutting off the local simple folk from what they need. Or there's the small, gentle, hard-working community, risking their lives mining silver or gold deep under ground. But some greedy power broker buys up shares, attempting to take over the mine, assuming control of the assets. Or there's the story of sod-busters who experience a few years of drought and blight, and the unscrupulous banker offers loans but then forecloses, assuming farm after farm and driving folks off their fields, homes and dreams.

Often there are some who rise up defiantly, but the powerful bad guys, never wanting to get blood on their hands, hire other bad guys, gun slingers and ne'er-do-wells, to defend and intimidate, set fires, poison wells and shoot the odd farmer or miner in the back.

These are stories of innocence and oppression; power and corruption. But the innocent, who rise up in defiance become too brash and get themselves killed. And those too weak, too frightened, find themselves helpless and defenceless.

Enter the hero. You know their names: Gene Autrey, Audie Murphey, Roy Rogers, Clint Eastwood. You know the stories.

But this is God's story, a story much older than the westerns. Innocence, oppression, helplessness..... and deliverance.

We don't know what to do. Evil is all around. The law is good. But who will enforce the law? I cannot understand my own actions. I want to do what is right. I want what is good. But I can't do it! I get so riled up and angry and vengeful that I want to strike back. But then I become just like those I hate. And being just like them, I want to raise my fists or draw my gun. And some with me will die. And others become more wounded than they were before. And I find myself outgunned. Or a coward. Wretched people that we are... who will rescue us from this body of death?!

Oh, thanks be to God!

There is this stranger in town! He rides in on a pale horse. (Someone said, "No, not a horse... a donkey!" But who would believe that?)

He's exactly the one we hoped for. Tall, straight, confident. He's quiet, strong and mysterious. One of us, but not like us. Is he fast? Have you seen him in action? Can he draw? Surely this one will drive off the chariot and the war-horse. Surely this one will be a true peace officer. Surely we will be delivered from the waterless pit and be allowed back to green pastures, still waters, and full granaries.

But he's got no gun! He'll stand up to corruption. But he won't raise his voice. Or his fist. He won't back down. He won't run away. But he won't strike back, but he won't run away.

Maybe he's not the one? Maybe we should send for the Marshall. Or the army! Although... maybe he's just enough of a leader, just enough of a difference, that we can enlist a few others and arm them... maybe even some of the women will take up the fight... maybe we'll still have a shoot-out and drive this scourge from our midst!

But this quiet one, gentle one, yet ever so strong and determined, will not rise to violence. "Put away your guns. Those who live by violence will die by violence."

"Put away your guns." Who's gonna believe that?

"Turn your hearts from hatred and anger." Who's gonna believe that?

"There is another way. I am the way. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy."

I say, "I don't understand my own actions. I don't understand his actions! I know what is right. This ain't right!.... This man's gonna die!"

See, here's the difference between the western and the gospel. We like westerns. Right makes might... and might makes right. And the good guys win. And the hero gets the girl, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

Except the good we want is not what we do. And what we do is also evil. Even if we fight but the white hat never falls off... and our guns never run out of bullets ... and anyone we shoot always gets it in the hand and never dies.

See, in God's story, those who are good are compassionate. Their glory is in standing up always for justice, never backing down, never compromising, but so very slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The good upholds those who fall and lifts up those bowed down. The good somehow are released from their imprisonment under oppression because they remain prisoners of hope. And the dominion of the evil cattle baron and the conspiratorial capitalist and the war-mongering imperialist falls. Always. There is another dominion that endures throughout the generations. Because glory is not in fighting and winning. Glory is not even in dying and winning. Glory is in dying, if necessary, and rising as required. Rising to new life. Rising to transformation. Rising to resurrection. Rising to healing and wholeness. Rising free from every bondage, free from every heavy yoke. Rising to new beginnings.

The girl still gets the guy. The children still run free. The angry lie silent, eyes open, seeing nothing. The hopeful still sing, even as they mourn. The hopeful still dance. And eat and drink. And it's not what you expect and it's not how you thought it would be. And it makes no sense. And it makes all the sense in the world! It is wisdom vindicated.

It's wisdom revealed to simple folk, those who are childlike, those who don't have to have all the answers and don't have to be in control. Children who trust that the Father will provide, and find that it is so.

Some say, "God has a plan." I don't know about that. If God has a plan, I don't understand it. Like a child, I say all too often, "That's not fair!" But I do know that God has a will! It is gracious and merciful and steadfast and everlasting.

And when the story ends and the lights come up. ...When the story ends and the credits roll, it's not because the good guys are good... but because God is Good.

It's not like any western I have ever seen.

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