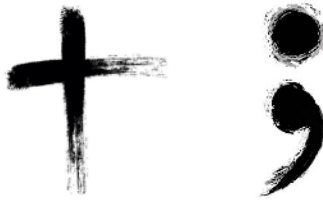


St. James Lutheran Church
49 Middle Hwy Barrington, RI 02806
Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019



"The Author is God, and the Story is Your Life"

"A semicolon is used when the author could have chosen to end their sentence, but chose not to. The Author is God, and the sentence is your life."

Station One: "God Will Write the Story"

The semicolon is a bridge to another part of the story. It is a reminder that there is still more to be said, more that will unfold. From the beginning, God is the Author of Creation, speaking amazing things into being. From the beginning of our lives-formed from the dust of the earth-God is working to write people into this amazing story. God has written you into this story, and God is always working to help you write the story of your life.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[9] says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of

them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Prayer

Gracious God, you are the author of my life. You have written a story of love to guide me. You have written a story of good news to fill my heart with peace. You have written a story that is undying, sending Jesus to live and die and rise again so that I may rise, too.

And yet, sometimes it seems that there are so many other voices competing to write my story for me. Sometimes, I am swept up in the pace of life, and feel as though my story is a story of rushing and working and doing. Sometimes, I am swept up in fears about the future-fears that try to write a direction for my life that I don't want for myself. Sometimes, other people seem to be trying to take over the story with demands or advice for my life. All of these things, and more, sometimes make it hard to see the ways in which your hand works to write the story.

Help me to see that, in all things, you are the Author of my life. That where the world would bring fear, and try to put a period at the end of each sentence, you are there with a semicolon that signals a new beginning. Help me to see that when my world is busy and chaotic that you are there to write words of peace and calm. Help me to see that when others try to move the story away from you, that you are there with a message of grace, keeping this story going. When I am tired and exhausted and ready to quit, help me to keep going. Write your story on my heart.

As I begin this journey of faith, help me to see in you a story that is always unfolding. Help me to live into this story, knowing that you are the Author of my life. Help me to live into this story, knowing that you will help me to write it each day. Help me to live into this story through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Station Two: "God's Story is Love, Even When I'm Afraid"

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly

I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Sit for a few moments and think about things that fill you with fear. This might be uncomfortable. There are things that, just by looking at them, make us afraid. They startle us and cause our heart to start racing. There are thoughts that pop into our head, sometimes without warning, that make us afraid. There are fears that we hold within ourselves that threaten to prevent us from doing things we would really like to do. Fear can put a period at the end of just about any sentence. Fear, when it is strong, can stop our story right in its tracks.

God's story isn't driven by fear. God's story isn't drowned out by loud, threatening voices. God's story isn't told in our insecurities. God's story doesn't worry about the moths that might consume, the robbers that might break in and steal, or the rust that might destroy. God's story is a story of love, and because of this, fear will never get the final word. Fear can't put a period at the end of God's story.

Think about those things that cause you fear. Think about how they threaten to stop you from doing all that God knows you can. Think about

them for a moment. Even though it might be uncomfortable, let them sit with you. Repeat them to yourself silently. If you would like to, write some of them down on a piece of paper with a pencil. Sit with them and reflect on the ways in which God can work to remove them from your life. Now, in every place where they signal an ending point-a stop to the story-imagine God gently erasing them and writing something new. Use an eraser to erase the words you wrote, imagining that God is helping you to do this-not just on the paper before you, but in all the ways they threaten you in your daily life. Allow God to take those thoughts of fear from you. Imagine God writing another sentence, new words, beyond them. They are still there, but with God's love they are no longer guiding your story.

Station Three: "God's Story is Full of Grace"

Jesus once told a story about a fig tree that was having trouble producing figs. The tree didn't just produce figs that were too small or too sour-it didn't produce figs at all! For three years, this little tree failed produce any figs. It had one job and it wasn't doing it. The man who owned the vineyard where the fig tree grew noticed this. He noticed how the vines in his vineyard produced grapes and the trees in his vineyard produced olives, and how the other fig trees gave him figs. But this little fig tree gave nothing. So the man told his gardener: "Cut it down!" Get rid of it. After three years of coming to this same tree and finding nothing, he has had enough. It is time for this fig tree to be removed so that something else can grow in its place. Something that will produce. The landowner is ready to put a period at the end of the story of this little fig tree.

There are seasons in our life when we might feel like that little fig tree. When all we want to do, all we were created to do, is bear fruit-produce something-but nothing comes. Sometimes, we try and try and try, but nothing seems to work. Other times, the things we do don't turn out the way we thought they would. Still other times, we might find ourselves struggling to even put forth the effort. Sometimes, like the fig tree, this goes on for longer than we would like.

Jesus wrote a character into his story who sees things differently than the landowner does. Jesus tells us about the gardener, the person who spends his time in the vineyard caring for the trees and plants that grow there. While his instructions from the landowner are clear: "Cut it down!", he's not ready to do this. He's not willing to put the period on this sentence just yet. He replies to the landowner "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." This is a semicolon moment. While the landowner could have ended the story by cutting down the little fig tree and planting something else, the gardener is working to keep this story going.

Jesus is like the gardener. Jesus knows that the little fig tree is fragile. Jesus also knows that the fig tree has potential. With the right care and attention, with a little pruning and fertilizing, with time, this fig tree might do what it has yet to do-bear figs.

Jesus knows that we are like the fig tree. That sometimes, we fail to produce. Sometimes, we struggle. Sometimes, we need a little help.

You are the fig tree. Thankfully, God is the gardener. God refuses to let anyone cut you down before God has the chance to work with you, care for you, and give you the opportunity to grow and thrive and bear fruit.

Think of an area of your life where you would like to see growth, where you would like to bear more fruit. Write one word to represent this and clip it to the tree in the sanctuary or place it somewhere you will see it throughout this Lenten season. Then offer the following prayer.

Prayer:

Gracious God, I am like a little fig tree. I am planted. I am rooted. I am growing. And yet, sometimes the fruit I want to bear in this life doesn't come. I can't do this alone. I need your help. I need care and attention. I need more time. Help me to see in you a loving gardener who devotes his life not to cutting away, but building up. Help me to see the ways in which you are feeding and watering me. Help me to see the ways in which you are working to help me tell a story of fruitfulness. Help me to see in you the potential for a new chapter in life-one that is full of life and bearing good fruit. In Jesus' name, amen.

Station Four: "God Always Works to Extend the Story"

In God's story of creation, the first person was created from the dust of the earth. God formed this person and breathed God's own breath of life into him. As we begin this season of reflection, we are reminded of this. That we are dust. We use the sign of the cross of Jesus, marked on our forehead in dusty ashes, to remember this. One day, we will return to that dust. This act is a reminder that the story of God's love is told through the cross of Christ, and that this story is undying. On the cross, God works to extend the story. In our lives, God uses the cross to do the same thing. In baptism, we are marked with the cross in the water from the font. Today, we retrace that indelible mark with the dust of creation. Today, we see it clearly, and with it we are reminded of our own mortality, but also of our new life in Christ.

If you are working through this service alone, you may make the sign of the cross on your own forehead, saying the following:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

If you are working through this service with others, turn to one another, and make the sign of the cross on someone else's forehead, saying the following:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Station Five: "God's Story is Full of Opportunity"

In our prayers, personal and collective, we see an opportunity for partnership with God and one another. We lift up prayers for ourselves, our church, and our world, knowing that God is listening and responding. God is active and full of grace to save and redeem—full of grace for new opportunities. As you pray, use the prayers below, but also feel free to add your own prayers to the board in front of you. As we pray, God gives us grace and opportunity for new beginnings and new life.

Seeking the grace, mercy, and love of almighty God, we offer our prayers for the church, for people in need, and for all of creation.

A brief silence.

Holy and righteous God, teach us, your church, to be honest about our sinfulness. Turn our hearts back to you to receive the fullness of your forgiveness and redemption. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Open wide your hand to satisfy the needs of every living thing. Send your Spirit to places suffering from drought or floods. Fill every habitat with life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Raise up reconcilers who point us to the sources of injustice and teach us how to build relationships. Establish your lasting peace among the nations. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Soothe the souls of people who feel like they are beyond your mercy (*especially*). Wash away the barriers that keep us far from you, and restore joy in our lives. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Fill our fasting bodies with your Spirit of justice. Lead us into the challenging work of feeding and freeing all people. Fulfill your purpose in us. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Reveal the treasures of heaven through the witness of all your saints (*especially*). Give us the will to journey faithfully and to bear Christ's salvation to all who yearn for it. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Reveal your will as you receive our prayers, and conform our ways to your ways; through the saving work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,

thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Station Six: "God's Story is Still Unfolding"

Words of Blessing: pause at the font to remember God's love for you as you go.

Spend some time thinking about the ways in which God is working to help you write the story of your life. Where is God helping you to remove the things that signal only an ending and write a new sentence?

Blessing:

Gracious God, as I go, I will look to you to write the story of my life. When I am tempted to put a period at the end of the sentence, let me look to you. You are the one who can erase every ending and create a new beginning. Help me to see this as I travel through this season of reflection. Help me to see the semicolon moments that you are presenting to me and keep the story going.

As I go, I ask your blessing and I count on it, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.