

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 16:19-31, “Parable of the Invisible Man”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/30/2026

The Bible is pretty wild, right?

You can be reading the stories of Jesus,
and things seem to be very cool. This guy is a great storyteller.

There’s stories of unexpected family reunions happening,
stories of random people getting invited to lavish parties,
there are stories of rascally servants who outsmart their masters
and get to keep their jobs because the master is so generous...
and then when you least expect it,
there’s a guy who’s trapped in a lake of unquenchable fire for eternity
looking up at heaven and begging the beggar of his former estate
for a drop of water from his finger –
but the chasm between them shall not be crossed!

Wait, whaaaat? Jesus, this is not a nice story.

I thought you were the guy who was all about loving neighbors
and offering second chances and whatnot.

All of a sudden we went from wise perspectives on life
to a tale of horror
I wouldn’t young children to be exposed to.

Well, here’s the deal:

It’s a scary story to be sure, but it’s not a story that’s original to Jesus.

Eugene Peterson shares that Jesus is using an old Egyptian story
as the basis for this parable. In fact, several other versions
of this Egyptian folktale were making the rounds in ancient Palestine.
Peterson writes, “The basic story line tell of the journey of the god Si-Osiristo
the underworld where he observed the fate of a rich man and a commoner,
portrayed as a reversal of fortunes,

the rich man's funeral unattended and the commoner buried in great pomp. ...
Jesus' hearers would have been familiar with the folktale
into which Jesus inserted the names of Abraham and Lazarus,
customizing the Egyptian story for his Jewish and Samaritan listeners."

So before we get too freaked out that
"this is what Jesus is telling us the afterlife is really going to be like
and oh my God please don't let me burn forever" – It's. A. Story.

And it's not even a Hebrew story. It's just an old story that Jesus is telling again –
the scene is no more meant to be real
than any of the other scenes in the stories that Jesus tells.

The question is not "Is this what hell is really like?"
The question is, "What is Jesus' purpose in his retelling
of this famous old tale?"

In keeping with the Egyptian motif, Jesus paints a picture of extreme contrasts:
First there's Clothing: Purple wool vs. dog licked wounds
Then there's Food: Daily lamb feast vs. begging for scraps
And of course there is the Residence: Gated compound vs. the open street

And this is why Eugene calls this the parable of the Invisible Man.
Because Lazarus was just nothing but a piece of road waste
to the rich fellow. Not seen at all. Not worth paying attention to.
Certainly not worth helping out.

But then there is the fourth area of contrast. Name:
unnamed rich man vs. the named Lazarus ...
It's the only area in which Lazarus has an edge on this other guy
while they are alive, and a hint of the reversal of fortune
to come when they are dead.

And indeed, Jesus also describes starkly distinct conditions in the afterlife.

Now I don't know about you,

but I've always read the afterlife part of the story
as an up and down kind of situation.

Lazarus went with the angels way, way up,

and that mean guy in purple wool went way, way down.

And the chasm spoken of by Abraham was not like the Grand Canyon,
but more like looking up and down an elevator shaft.

But now I've realized that all these years I had it all wrong.

Commentator Joel Green reveals that both the rich man and Lazarus are
... in Hades. Which we also know as hell. (!)

In Jewish literature of Jesus' time, Hades was the universally assumed destination
for all human beings after death while they awaited final judgment.

Which means – they both went to hell!

(In this story, which, remember is just a retelling of an old Egyptian story,
not a unique revelation of Jesus
or description of metaphysical reality.)

So they're all in Hades.

But there were different kinds of experiences one could receive there.

The rich man is in a place of great torment,
while Lazarus is carried by angels to the "bosom of Abraham"
which might refer to a seat near
the great patriarch of the faith at a banquet table.

So when the rich man looks up, he's not seeing from hell into heaven,
he's looking from the bad end of Hades
way across to the good end of Hades.

And who does he see? "Oh, is that Father Abraham?

And who is beside him but wretched Lazarus?!?"

“Father, Abraham – excuse me – yes, way down here on the
hot and burning side of things, would you be a dear
and send that worthless beggar Lazarus to me
with a drop of cool water on his finger?”

Now Abraham is renowned in the Bible for his hospitality to strangers.
So for the rich man to repeatedly call him “father”
and ask a favor of Lazarus is a multilayered irony.
This is Jesus’ sense of humor at work.

When Abraham refuses the man’s request due to the great chasm between them
(which makes more sense if you know they’re all in the same realm),
his attention turns to his brothers.
And that’s when Jesus puts his unique twist on the story:
It’s not really a story about Lazarus and the rich man at all.
It’s a story about the rich man’s brothers ... and Jesus himself.

So we need to act this last part out.
I’ll be the rich man in torment, and I need a volunteer from the balcony
to be Father Abraham at the microphone there.
Who will be my volunteer?

Now, look, there’s a huge chasm between us,
so we have to speak to each other with cupped hands
so the sound will travel all the way across.

“Oh, my father Abraham – I beg you, send Lazarus to my family,
for I have five brothers. Let him warn them,
so that they will not also come to this place of torment.”

Abraham replied, “They have Moses and Prophets; let them listen to them.”

“No, father ... no my blessed Father Abraham, no, NO! That won’t work.

They'll ignore those old-fashioned religious has-beens.

They need something ... *SPECIAL!*

Like, if someone, someone from the dead goes to them,
if someone from the realm of Hades returned to the land of the living, oh,
then (I promise you!) they would repent."

Abraham: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced -- even if someone *rises from the dead.*"

And *Scene!* (Wow – thank you for helping with that!)

Can you see what Jesus saw beneath the surface of this parable?

He used its familiarity with the crowd
to get in near their unguarded soft-spots.

What about you? Do you ever think that all you really need to live by faith
is a great sign from God?

A momentous, undeniable spiritual experience?

Do you wish that God would give such a thing to others
so that they would have no choice but to believe?

Jesus point in the parable is this:

though God does great things, the constant search for them
is nothing but magical thinking.

The parable is not really about people's eternal destiny at all.

It's about whether we will listen for God's voice here and now.

Not in a miraculous fantasy, but in our real lives.

And if we hear it, will we turn around and act on it.

What will it take for you to hear God's message?

What will it take for your neighbor to hear?

Do they need someone to rise from the dead?

And even if that happened...then what?

Repent is a tired old church word.

It means ceasing our self-absorbed narratives of inevitability,
dropping our excuses for why not,
submitting to God's way of love
and embracing our neighbors and the earth itself
as our kin.

It means that we stop living in a world filled with invisible people,
invisible creations of God.