

Sermon

June 5, 2016 | The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Text: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

For the past six months, I have been itching to preach this sermon, because this sermon is going to be about Star Wars. And now that we are almost six months past the release of the latest Star Wars movie, I can disclaim any responsibility for spoilers. If you care about spoilers and haven't seen it yet, it's your own dang fault.

Now before I proceed, I know there are plenty of you here who don't like Star Wars and therefore couldn't care less about this newest episode of the story. That's fair enough. But I hope that by the end of this sermon, even if you don't like Star Wars you will start to care about it. For whatever constellation of reasons – and for better or worse – Star Wars is not just another piece of pop culture. For people my age, and a little bit older, and a little bit younger – that is, the people who are in the process of taking charge of this world – Star Wars has heavily shaped how we see and understand ourselves the universe around us. Its dialogues are committed to our memories. Its characters are icons for some of life's everyday mundane struggles. It's for this reason that this latest film – which is, let's be honest,, only fairly good as a film – how this movie could nonetheless gross a billion dollars in just 128 days. Star Wars is our new source of root metaphors, and in that sense, it has, at least in this country, supplanted Homer, Virgil, Uncle Remus, and even to a certain extent the Bible itself. Star Wars is our mythology.

Back when George Lucas wrote the first Star Wars movie, he intentionally wrote it like a mythology, drawing on the writing of a mythologist named Joseph Campbell. Star Wars was intentionally crafted to be a story that does the kinds of work that biblical stories do: providing a paradigm for understanding the universe, reinforcing the social order or challenging it, guiding through the stories of our own lives, and drawing us into contemplation of the transcendent.

That's why this sermon is about Star Wars, because, to the extent that it is indeed a myth and one that is modern and accessible, it can help us to better uncover and understand the mythological structures of our own scriptures.

And today I'm going to give you an important example of how that works.

In today's readings, we hear the same story told twice. Once in the First Book of Kings and then again in the Gospel of Luke. The story goes like this: A widow's only son is dead or dying. She is losing not only her child but also her source of protection, income, and social identity. A man of God comes and restores the son to health and life. And through this miracle, there is an epiphany for those who witness it. That's the story. The details are different, but it's the same story told twice. Why? Why does Luke retell this story in this gospel?

Star Wars can help us come up with an answer. One of the things most commented on about this latest Star Wars movie – and one the things most *complained about* by certain folks – is that it is very similar to the first Star Wars movie, the one that came out in 1977. So many of its settings, characters, plot points, and even specific shots are nearly identical to that original film. It can be said that this latest Star Wars movie is a retelling of the first, the same story told with different details.

Despite the complaints, this is consistent with Star Wars working as a mythology. It is this pattern of retelling stories with different details that characterizes many myths. Eliade said that myths unfold like a spiral, moving both cyclically and forward. As a story is retold, a dialogue is created between the ancient past and the realities of the present. With every retelling, something of the present is incorporated into the myth. Every retelling is an opportunity to ask, "How are we going to tell this story *now*? How is this going to become *our* story?"

That brings me to the *other* thing most commented on about this latest Star Wars movie – *and* the other thing most complained about by certain folks – which is, who the new main characters are:

- a technologically savvy and powerful woman who isn't rescued but does all the rescuing,
- a black man who shows that soldiers can be as much victims of the empire they serve as are those they conquer,
- and a dashing roguish pilot who is *possibly* gay (but we're still waiting for confirmation on that).

This latest movie keeps the mythic spiral going, the same story now told with these new details. And it's these details that make all the difference because they progress the story parallel to the progression of our culture. The struggles of the present day for racial, gender, and sexual justice are incorporated into this myth from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Knowing this, we can now better understand today's gospel story, a story retold with different details. With the help of Star Wars, we can see what really matters to Luke by looking at the small details he changes from the story about Elijah.

First Detail: In the original story, the mother says to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" In this story, the widow understands her son's death as a punishment for her sins, and Elijah as the instrument of that punishment. In Luke's story, the widow says nothing to Jesus. Rather, it is Jesus who responds to her with compassion and the simple words, "Do not weep."

Second Detail: In the original story, Elijah carries the boy away to privacy in order to plead with God. He repeats the widow's theology because this is the theology he is seeing played out as he speaks. The frame of this story is that God has brought a drought upon Israel as punishment for the evil of her King. This widow has just fed and watered Elijah, the only food and drink available in the parched land. Elijah is saying to his God, "Have you no decency, sir, at long last?" It is in response to Elijah's voice, his voice calling the Lord to compassion, that God revives the son. In Luke's story, Jesus revives the young man not in privacy but in front of a large crowd. And Jesus does not plead with God, he doesn't even offer a short prayer. The miracle is performed not by Jesus speaking to God, but by Jesus speaking to the son.

Third Detail: In the original story, the widow says to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The story concludes by showing us that in the midst of an entire nation that has gone astray from godliness, here is yet one woman who has returned to faith in God. In Luke's story, the people speak not to Jesus but offer glory to God, saying "God has looked favorably on his people."

Luke's story is not just another nice miracle. Nor is it meant simply to legitimize Jesus by making him look like Elijah. Rather, by making these small changes in the details, what Luke is doing is subverting the theology in the original story

and presenting a different picture of God from the one the widow and Elijah imagine. The God who abides in Jesus does not need a prophet to make a plea for compassion. In Jesus, God is the one who sees the mourning woman and has compassion for her. In Jesus, it is not we who first speak to God in order to be saved, but God who speaks first to us and thereby raises us to new life. In Jesus, it is not the sinfulness of the mother or the sinfulness of the nation that is remembered. Rather, in Jesus, what is remembered is God's promises to her people. Indeed, this remembrance is the thesis of Luke's whole gospel, Luke's most basic understanding of who Jesus is, as articulated by Jesus' own prophetic mother, when she sang, "The Lord has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke's gospel speaks to the realities of his time and the realities of how God is manifest in Jesus, a God who comes with compassion and renewal.

Yet this begs the question, why retell this story at all? Why not just tell a completely new story about how compassionate God is?

Here again, Star Wars helps me think about this. I think the first three Star Wars movies imbued in me and other fans a deep and inescapable call to fight against the systems of oppression and hatred that the Galactic Empire symbolized. It is that core value of this myth that made us turn back to the story and wonder, "Why is there only one black dude in this entire galaxy?" and "Why is the female protagonist wearing a gold bikini?" and "I wonder if any of all these stormtroopers the heroes keep killing have names, and families, and stories of their own?" In other words, it is the mark of a good myth that it raises subversive questions about itself. A good myth is akin to what Paul Tillich called a self-breaking symbol.

So, too, with our own scriptures. The story of Elijah brings us into the presence of an all-powerful and zealous God who *also* has the capacity to hear a single voice calling out for mercy. If Luke, generations later, sees a compassionate God abiding in Jesus, it is because the people of Israel had gotten a glimpse of that very same God in the old stories like this one about Elijah. That is what makes it a story worth telling and retelling, because it is a story that breaks itself open to reveal a God not confined to a mythic past but who lives and reigns for the sake of her people even now. Amen.