

I was young when I first saw the original Star Wars trilogy - young enough that Episode IV was still just called *Star Wars*. As with much that forms the content of our childhood, I never thought about the political nature of those films. What I mean is that when I watched Star Wars, it was just good guys vs. bad guys. I had no concept of the fact that the "good guys" were the Rebels and the "bad guys" were the Galactic Empire, which meant that Darth Vader represented a governing authority that had at some point at least been legitimate. I never wondered what the map of the Galactic Federation looked like or which planets were involved in the rebellion or what the Rebels' succession plan was in the unlikely event they deposed the emperor.

I was much older - and had seen *Star Wars* many more times - before I understood *Star Wars* for what it was - a story of rebellion. But that makes sense out of why it was so popular - we are a country of rebels, casting off the tyranny of an unjust ruler to make our own way.

We live in a world in which everyone has their own idea about how it should run. That's why we like movies like Star Wars - you don't have to ask if Darth Vader is bad and Luke Skywalker is good. We don't say, Hey, wait a minute, Luke is recruited by an underground organization that's trying to overthrow the legitimate government. Doesn't that make him a terrorist?

Those questions don't belong in the world of Star Wars, a world of clear good guys and bad guys. We ask questions like that in *our* world. A world where sometimes rebels rebellion is good - as our own rebellion against the British crown, and sometimes rebellion is bad - like the rebels today who call themselves ISIS. And sometimes, rebellion is a mixture of good and bad, with good people on both sides, as in our own Civil War.

Rebellion is messy exactly because in and of itself, rebellion is neither good nor bad. Sometimes, the rebels are evil - like Hitler or ISIS. Sometimes, the *systems* are so evil, they need to be overthrown (like the cases of the Galactic Empire or Western Imperialism, or the Apartheid system in South Africa).

And if we're really honest with ourselves, this is scary, because we're all rebels to some degree. And we live in a world where it's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. There's a chance we're not fighting for the right side. But how would we know?

I know - you're thinking, I'm not a rebel! But most basically, Rebellion is an active discontentment with the way things are. Whether our rebellion is loud - like armed revolution or protesting or punk rock music or fashion or Facebook arguments, or whether it's quite, like cheating on our taxes, or speeding or secret affairs. Rebellion is active - its not just grumbling.

That's why I say in some way, we're all rebels. We all have a sense of the way the world *should* be, and we live into that sense. That impulse - to have the world our way, is actually what introduced rebellion into the world in the first place. From the beginning, humanity has

said over and over to God that we would prefer our own ways to God's way. The story of Creation in the Scriptures is a story that ends with rebellion.

Which is why, when I say that in some way we're all rebels, in some way we all prefer our own vision of the world to anyone else's, we get nervous.

Because historically, rebel stories don't have the happy ending we got in *Return of the Jedi*. The Civil War left us with wounds that in some places still have not healed. Or take the French Revolution - even when the rebels won, they left a bloody legacy of death, infighting and more death. Even Nelson Mandela, a black South African man who worked for more than two decades to oppose Apartheid, a man we would probably consider a "good rebel" planned bombings and was arrested and sentenced to life in prison when he was 45 years old.

Civil War. Guillotines. Life imprisonment. These are how *people* deal with rebellion, and I want us to acknowledge we've all rebelled against an all-powerful God? How would such a God deal with those who cross him, who refuse his way?

This is where many of us get shivers as we think of hellfire and brimstone and moons turning to blood and sword-wielding, white-horse-riding judgment-bringers.

So I want to offer you some good news - this picture we have of God as an angry judgment-bringer who is moments from smiting all those who dare oppose him is wrong. What we actually find in the Scriptures is a God who loves humanity - all humanity. A God who refused to allow us to die in our rebellion, to lose ourselves to sin. A God who launched a counter-rebellion, who died as a rebel at the hands of the very people he came to rescue. A God who wouldn't stay dead, who was raised to live to offer life and power and hope to both the rebels and the Empire.

I want to show you today that God's counter-rebellion wasn't just good news for all the Luke Skywalkers. It was good for the Darth Vaders too.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to Acts 3. On Easter, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Now, in this time between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost, when the Church received the Holy Spirit, we're investigating stories of the first Christians. We're finding that the Spirit challenged them again and again to move beyond the constraints of the religion they'd grown up in. That in Jesus, God was doing something new, something bigger.

Today, we're going to see that God's plan, the counter-rebellion Jesus' death and resurrection kicked off, was crazier than anyone thought because it was characterized by radical forgiveness and welcome.

[**Temple showing the Beautiful Gate**] Two of the early Church's key leaders, Peter and John, have just arrived at the Temple. The Temple was Israel's religious and political center, so in the first few months after Jesus' resurrection, the first Christians taught there, announcing to everyone they could that God was doing something new. (You can imagine this didn't make the people in charge too happy.)

As they approach the Temple, they meet a man who's been unable to walk since he was born. Every day since he was old enough to beg, he's been carried to the Beautiful Gate (one of the 12 entrances to the Temple grounds). Because he was disabled, this was as close as this man could get to the Temple, to God. He was considered an outsider, not fully human, not fully part of God's people. He can do nothing but beg, rely on random acts of compassion from the hundreds who passed by him every day.

He begs Peter and John for money, and they admit they don't have any money. But then Peter says, "What I do have I give you freely: In the name of Jesus, get up and walk!" And the man does. His legs are healed and Peter and John help him up.

You can imagine what happens next: all the people who saw this freak out. Everyone knows this guy - he's been sitting, begging at this gate for decades. And now he's just been helped up from the ground, clinging to Peter and John as he learns to walk.

Miraculous!

So Peter, seeing this crowd gather, takes the opportunity to address them. It's his speech I want to focus on with you. Let's read it together, beginning in verse 11:

While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. -- Acts 3:11-19

Peter's speech is a call to repent. To turn from what they've been doing and throw themselves on God's mercy. He promises if they do, God will bring refreshment to them.

Peter says, "Hey everyone! You should repent! Repentance leads to refreshment!"

Which is a weird thing to say with a guy who's never walked in his life hanging from your arm, learning the new strength of his legs. Everyone's looking at Peter, at this miracle, and you know what they're all thinking, right?

HOW DID THIS GUY GET UP AND WALK?

And Peter says, Why are you surprised that this guy can walk? And then he *barely* mention this guy again in his whole speech.

For Peter, this story isn't about a miraculous healing.

Which is where we differ from Peter.

We look at a story like this and *all* we can see is a miraculous healing. We are totally captivated by the fact that a person who couldn't walk, who could *never* walk, all of a sudden could.

So here's what I want to do: Today, I want to follow Peter. Today, I want to assume - as he did - that there's a bigger miracle in this story than the healing.

And then next week, we're going to come back and talk about what the healing means.

So today, the question Peter forces us to ask: What if God's final goal isn't to make everyone healthy? What if God is doing something else, something bigger?

I know... that doesn't sit well, does it? But look at today's story - the Bible tells us this disabled man sat at the Beautiful Gate *every day*. Every day. And Jesus went to the Temple many times. That means he passed this guy, probably more than once.

And Jesus didn't heal him. We don't have any record of Jesus even interacting with him.

God doesn't heal everyone. We know that from our own experiences, our own prayers, but we see it also in the Scriptures. (More on this next week!)

Which brings me back to Peter's speech. If God's main objective is not to heal people, Peter's words make much more sense.

After chiding the onlookers for being surprised, Peter says, "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead... I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Peter's objective is that the people understand the *meaning* of this healing. The healing is not for its own sake, but to announce to them the good news that God has forgiven them and welcomed them in.

For Peter, *that's* the real miracle. That rebels are forgiven. That God has forgiven the very people who killed God.

That's worth repeating: For Peter, the real miracle is not that a man who couldn't walk can now walk. The real miracle is that God has forgiven the rebels who killed God.

Peter looks at the gathering crowd and says, "Why are you amazed? God raised Jesus, whom you killed, from the dead! Of course he can make this man walk. The real question isn't, How can this man walk? The real question is why aren't *you* celebrating that God has forgiven you and opened wide the way to life? What's stopping you from repenting of your sins and your ignorance and turning to the God who doesn't hold grudges?

Truthfully, it may actually be harder to believe that God would offer forgiveness to those that killed him. Because let's be honest - that's not how the world works.

We don't live in a world where rebels are forgiven. We live in a world where the winners write the histories and the losers are destroyed or at best imprisoned.

And to be honest - we've heard God's the same way. Right? Many of us have heard of the angry God of the Bible, who smites his foes and commands genocides and certainly doesn't forgive.

So how can Peter claim God is forgiving now? Did God take a Xanax?

What Peter says is very important - look again:

"I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Peter says, You didn't know what you were doing when you killed Jesus. But God had planned all along to use your rebellion to rescue you. God has had this plan in the works for

ages. This is *good news*. God isn't holding your sin against you anymore. It doesn't matter what you've done. You can be forgiven, restored to a relationship with God.

Which is exactly what this walking man was a picture of for them. This man had been kept from the Temple his whole life. He wasn't part of the community. He was considered a half-person, a danger to everyone else's access to God.

But through Jesus' resurrection, God had broken out of the Temple. God is now not just in the Temple, locked away from the world. God is out in the world, among the sinners, among the sick and broken, among the crucified.

In Jesus, God has started a rebellion. In Jesus, God is rebelling against humanity, against our sinfulness, against our Empire-building and our warped, twisted values that would exclude those who are not like us, those whose bodies don't conform, those who don't do what they're told.

That's why Jesus died - Rome saw him as a threat to their order, so they executed him in that particular, painful way Rome reserved for those who refused to see the world Rome's way - crucifixion.

Crucifixion is a rebel's death. Rome hung Jesus on a cross because he refused to live in a world of haves and have-nots. He taught that the poor are blessed. That God is with the peacemakers, not the warmongers. That those who divide their loyalties, trying to please every god of this age will never see the one true God. Rome hung Jesus on a cross because he claimed to be the king of a kingdom with no boundaries, no borders and no citizens. Everyone could be part of Jesus' world. Anyone was welcomed into Jesus' new thing.

God started a revolution against Rome's Way, against our human inclination to remake the world into our own image and Rome crucified him for it. But God raised Jesus from the dead, proving that Rome has no power.

And the shocking turn is that God invites the Empire to join the rebellion.

This is where we want to say, Well, that makes a nice story. We smile when we see Vader's force ghost at the end of Jedi, but we know deep down that doesn't work in the real world. You can't lead a movement with forgiveness. Rebels either win or lose. Empires either win or lose.

We don't live in a world where everyone wins.

Except that in 1990, after more than a quarter-century in prison, Nelson Mandela was released to freedom. For the next four years, he worked with both blacks and white in South

Africa to achieve democratic elections in his country. When the first democratic elections were held in 1994, Mandela was elected president.

Once he had power, Mandela had the opportunity to exact vengeance on those who had oppressed his people for so long. But the reason we consider Nelson Mandela one of the greatest men in recent history is that he refused to respond to violence with violence.

Instead, Mandela saw forgiveness as his weapon moving forward. As he reflected on leaving prison, he said, "**As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.**"

Mandela knew what it's hard for us to grasp: forgiveness leads to peace.

Well... almost. Forgiveness is an essential first step. But forgiveness and restoration are two different things. Forgiveness is about me, about finding freedom from those who've hurt me. I can forgive someone whether they ever ask for it or not. As Mandela said, Forgiveness is about not living in a prison in my own head.

Obviously, God has forgiven us. But in order for us to receive God's forgiveness, we have to repent. We have to confess that we're rebels, that we've contributed to a world that divides and excludes. That's what Peter tells us: Repent. It's time. You know now. You know the good news that God is inviting us to a life of faith.

Peter is calling us to a faith for rebels *and* empires. For the rich *and* the poor. For the abled *and* the disabled. For the insiders *and* the outsiders. For the crucified *and* the crucifiers. For the Skywalkers *and* the Vaders.

So which will it be for you? Which rebellion will you choose? The rebellion of the Empire, against the way of God? The way that says Take what's yours no matter the cost? The way that privileges only a few who fit an impossible mold?

Or will you join God's rebellion, the rebellion against sin, the rebellion that's *for* humanity? Will you join the way of forgiveness, of reconciliation?

Some of us in here have never heard this good news before: that God is *for* you, that everything God has done is to rescue you. God is not angry with you. God has forgiven you. What you have done in ignorance, God has used to bring you to this place, to hear that you are invited to life. All you need to do is repent, which is a fancy way to say, turn from the way you're going and start following God.

Others among us have been following God for some time, but we have been reminded today that we are sorely in need of that same forgiveness Mandela found. We have been living in prisons of unforgiveness and rage. And you need to let go. You need to remember that you

serve a king whose death and resurrection made room for both the sinners and the saints.
The oppressed and the oppressors. The victims and the victimizers.

Prayer of Examine

1. When in the last week have I offered forgiveness?
2. When in the last week have I insisted on my own way?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to insist on my way?
4. What does it look like to receive and offer forgiveness in the next week?