

## Sermon: August 1, 2021

### **“We Are Groot”**

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Scripture: Isaiah 43: Luke 8:1-3, John 20:11-18

The month of August is notorious for being a bit slow in the life of the church, particularly in worship. We've hit the summer slump. It's hot. We're tired (especially if we have kids home from school all day) and we need an infusion of life up in this place. So, I had the wild idea that we should do a fun, interesting sermon series I'm calling: "August at the Movies." But when I began thinking about what films to choose, all the movies I've ever seen with any kind of message came rushing into my head and I knew I had to narrow it down. Since superhero movies have been in fashion this last decade and because I happen to think they're fun and offer us many moral lessons for life, this year, we're doing August at the Movies: Superhero Edition. This week, we're discussing *Guardians of the Galaxy*, a film from the Marvel Cinematic Universe circa 2014.

Not to worry: if you haven't seen the film, I've got a synopsis for you. The film follows a group of unlikely heroes throughout the far reaches of the galaxy. They are not your typical heroes. They don't look like other heroes we know. They don't act and speak like them. And all are involved in criminal activity, which is how they meet to begin with, each chasing after a goal: much of which revolves around an infinity stone that gives unlimited power to whoever has the guts and strength to wield it. Our heroes are 1. Star-Lord (aka Peter Quill), a man from Earth who was kidnapped as a child after the death of his mother by Yondu, a space outlaw involved in all kinds of criminal enterprise. 2. Gamora, a green human-like alien and the

adopted daughter of the ultimate bad-guy in the universe, Thanos. Gamora is a trained assassin and betrayed her father in an effort to escape his abusive service. 3. Rocket Raccoon, a genetically enhanced creature who looks like a raccoon, but moves and speaks like a human. Rocket travels with our 4<sup>th</sup> hero, Groot, a tree-like alien creature who is the muscle behind their criminal adventures, but speaks only three words: I am Groot. And last but not least we have Drax the Destroyer, a somewhat socially awkward human-like alien criminal who is going after one of the big bad guys in search of the stone because this man killed his wife and daughter.

Our five criminals chase after the infinity stone and end up finding themselves locked together in an intergalactic prison. It's not a nice place and they end up finding their way to one another, deciding, ultimately, to team up to stop the acquisition of the gemstone by Ronan or by Thanos, both of whom they know will use it to devastating ends. Each of these former criminals has a past that chases them through the film as they try to, for once in their lives, do the right thing.

But, it can be hard to escape a troubled or controversial past. Many historical and biblical figures can attest to this same truth. This cinematic trope is a trope for a reason. It's common. As I sat down to think about biblical stories that align with messages from popular films, I kept coming back to my favorite saint, Mary Magdalene. Now, you might be thinking, hold on just a second here, Pastor Jessica, are we thinking of the same Mary Magdalene? The woman possessed of seven demons? The one who has been maligned since the sixth century by the Western church? The one we so often associate with being a prostitute? Of all the saints, our new pastor's favorite is Mary Magdalene. What have we gotten ourselves into?

Well, my friends, yes, that's my favorite saint. Now hear me out: First of all, many biblical characters have lived troubled lives and made many missteps even after coming into close relationship with God and we are still quite fond of them. I'm looking at you Noah, David, and Paul. Second, Mary of Magdala was falsely said to be the anonymous "sinful woman" we read about in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke—yet there is no indication anywhere that Mary is the same woman or that Mary has any history of having lived a sinful life. It does say that Jesus cast seven demons out of her and that she became not just a follower, but a devoted disciple who, according to Luke 8, provided for him out of her own means. She is mentioned in every gospel account as having been with Jesus until the end and into his new beginning, witness (in the case of John the only witness) to the resurrection as we revisited in today's gospel readings. When all the other disciples had abandoned Christ, Mary never did. She was with him as he died and with him after he rose. She became, really, the first to spread the good news of the resurrection. We often think only of the twelve men who have been lifted so highly in our esteem as being the disciples, but many women followed Jesus, too, and Luke tells us a bit about that here.

But, as the early church knew, once you have received a bad reputation, true or not, it tends to stick with you. And that's what's happened to Mary Magdalene, disciple *to* the disciples. Like the Guardians of the Galaxy, her reputation has had to be rebuilt—first, in her own life as she moved through the first century Roman empire with Jesus, and then through the work of the church.

Mary came from a bustling fishing village along the sea of Galilee called Magdala. While she's been depicted in the most sexualized and scandalous ways for over a millennium, there's little to no truth to the popular misconceptions about her past. Yes, scripture tells us that she was possessed of demons, which Jesus cast out of her, and yes, that would have come with its own stigma, in that time, especially. But outside of that, we have no reason to believe she was the woman referred to in the chapter before. And even if she were, there's ample evidence that she was made new by her engagement with Jesus who had healed her of this possession. Not only has her reputation been unfairly sullied by an agenda of a few powerful men, but scholars think it's likely that Mary was probably of a much higher social class than first thought, a woman who had some personal wealth, who helped Jesus out of her own resources as attested to in Luke 8:2.

Remember how I told you that whenever a woman or child is mentioned in the story, we need to pay attention? Well, this is one of those times. A cursory, biased reading by folks who want to diminish the role of women in Christian leadership has led to Mary's character being maligned and falsified for centuries. Can you imagine trying to come back from that?

It's funny how we hear one narrative about someone and that narrative ends up defining that person for the rest of their lives. And sometimes, in our own lives, those stories become so pervasive that we begin to internalize them. We begin to believe our own "bad press." And once that happens, it's hard for us to regain our own sense of self, which is something we see the "Guardians of the Galaxy" deal with throughout the film. They wrestle with their pasts as they try to live into the new journey

they are on. In subsequent films, this thread continues. Their troubled, outcast pasts have become so integral to who they are that it's nearly impossible for them to see the good, let alone for anyone else to. They assume that they're bad and that once bad, that's all they'll ever be, right?

Well, as my favorite high school teacher once said (and I'll paraphrase), "You know what happens when you assume, right?" I'll stop there in case there are little ears listening, but basically, when you assume, you make everyone look bad. Because the truth is, they aren't their pasts. What happened in the years before didn't have to define the beings they could grow into. Mary Magdalene could have always been the woman possessed of seven demons, or she could choose a different path. She could let this teacher and healer from Nazareth heal her of this infirmity and she could choose to follow him. And in doing so, she could, in the words of the Old Testament Lesson today from Isaiah, "do a new thing." She knew that if God can make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, then God could do a new thing with her, too.

Because the truth is, your past only has to define you to the extent that you let it. You only have to be the person you *were* as long as you want to. At any point along your journey, you can be something new. You can let the words, teachings, ministry, and life of Jesus Christ inspire you to be more than you once were. Jesus was just a boy from Nazareth. He was trained as a carpenter until one day, he's walking down by a body of water and this wild man is dunking people in the water and Jesus goes down to it and the Holy Spirit comes upon him and he's something new. Paul walks along the road to Damascus and a vision appears before him and he becomes something new. Mary of Magdala is just an independent woman, trying to

get by while her body is riddled with the work of seven demons and this man from Nazareth comes along and suddenly, she's something new. Peter, Gamora, Rocket, Groot and Drax are just going about their criminal missions when an orb comes into their possession and, suddenly, they realize that they, too, can become something new.

For each of these characters, it's possible for them to become a part of something bigger than themselves. They can be part of what's good in the world, they can change the world—the galaxy, forever. I told you that the character Groot only said three words his entire life: I am Groot. Well, in the end of the film, as he essentially sacrifices himself for the rest of the bunch, he looks at his comrades and says, "We are Groot," indicating, I think, his recognition that he has become part of a team, a beloved community of people willing to go to bat for one another. Willing to be a new thing, together.

And here's the thing, so can you. Because whatever you've done. Whoever you were. Whatever has happened to you. Whatever your past is—if that person isn't the person you want to be, if that person isn't the person living into your deepest truths, if that person isn't the person who reflects beloved the image of God you were created in: you don't have to be that person anymore. You can choose to be something new, too. Because if God can do a new thing with Isaiah, with Jesus, with Saul of Tarsus, and again and again with Mary Magdalene, then God can do a new thing with you, too.

Each day, we get 24 new hours to partner with God in that work. We get a chance to live into a new truth about ourselves and about our spiritual destiny. Like Mary Magdalene, you aren't what's been done to you or what you have done. You are a beloved child of God every bit as worthy of

letting that divine spark within you shine brightly forth. Every bit as capable of being the salt and light we're called to be in the world. Every bit as good as any other member of any community worthy of having your gifts and divinely infused presence. The key though, is that you have to make that choice. You have to want it. You have to decide whether you want to live in the past as you were or live into the future and into the image God has of you, the image you were created in. So the real question you have to ask yourself is: who will you be?

Amen.