

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Last week we heard that the healing of the blind man had demonstrated that Jesus was the “light” of the world. John today takes another miracle and shows us that Jesus is authentic life in this story that is exclusive to the Gospel According to John. While our Lectionary Year has us reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we have been in the Gospel of John since the Second week of Lent where once again we hear,

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

This then, has been what we have experienced within our appointed Gospel lessons throughout our season of Lent. We have heard how that love is then manifest in the world and put into action. During this season that is dedicated to returning to God with a sincere heart and self-denial, there are times in the appointed Gospel lessons for Lent when God’s love may have caused some discomfort or some disagreement with our understanding of that love. Nonetheless, God so loves the world...even when we don’t understand God’s love or when we ourselves do not love the world or those in it. And so today we see God’s love in action once again as Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead within this very long Gospel lesson.

This Gospel lesson consists of forty-five verses that contain 891 words. If one is so compelled to research this story, you will find in most commentaries and in the Bible that it is referred to or entitled, “The Raising of Lazarus.” And keeping with this notion that God so loved the world as I have been doing during this season of Lent, we can easily say that God so loved the world, more specifically, God so loved Lazarus that God raised him from the dead...and we too, through our faith, live in the same hope of the promise of our resurrection at the time of our death.

This would be an easy way to interpret this lesson today, but I do not think that this story is totally about raising Lazarus up from the grave. I do not think that this is the extent of the Good News of the story, there is more to this story and a much deeper much more human manifestation of God’s love for us is being revealed in this story when we look past the “flashy” part of the story. By “flashy” I mean seeing a loved one being raised from the dead.

When I think of this story in my own context, I think of the pure joy and pleasure it would be to once again see my mom and dad, to see again, a very dear friend who tragically ended his life...to see friends and family that have died, would be overwhelming. I have been in tragic situations where I have had to tell a family or a spouse that their loved one has died. When experiencing the intensity of the emotion of that moment, I can only imagine the jubilation of coming back to those same folks in a couple of days and telling them, come with me and see, your loved one is not dead, but they have been raised from the dead.

Now sit in that for a moment and imagine seeing that certain loved one, again. Once the euphoric delight has subsided, what do you suppose you would say to that person who has been raised, better yet, what would they say to you? Would they be as happy as we are? After all the astonishment and all the joy what would the conversation be like? My point to the joy, the commotion, the astonishment, and the questions is this...there are forty-five verses and 891 words

within these verses, but only two verses with 40 words that focus on the raising of Lazarus within this long Gospel lesson. Here are the forty words:

<sup>43</sup> ...[Jesus] cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Here is the account of the resurrection of Lazarus. We hear nothing after this other than those who saw it believed in Jesus. We hear nothing about the sheer joy that the mourners may have experienced. We hear nothing that may suggest that their tears of sadness turned into tears of joy. We hear nothing about the possible thrill and wonder that Mary and Martha may have experienced in seeing their brother Lazarus coming out of the tomb...alive. I wonder how Lazarus may have felt about this...after all we say, when someone has passed, "well they're in a better place." I wonder if Lazarus was in that better place and had to come back then to this place...and was he happy about it? I wonder...if our suffering ends when we die, does Lazarus return to that suffering when he is raised?

What are the other forty-three verses, or the other 851 words within this story entitled "The Raising of Lazarus" telling us? Once again, I think the brilliance and the power of the Gospels is that it consistently and constantly shows us how we focus on one small aspect of things, draw conclusion from that one perspective and totally miss the bigger picture, not just of God, but in our everyday lives. In other words, we see Lazarus being raised from the dead and that seems to be all we see, but what is this entire story telling us and is there Good News if we turn our focus beyond Lazarus?

As we sit in the light of God's love for the world, the hardest lesson to understand is that this love will not stop the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, nor will it stop the death that we all experience in our lives. What we learn today in this Gospel lesson is that death is part of our lives. And in that death, we hear today within this long lesson, about the emotions that accompany death. We hear of grief, we hear of the tears and weeping that is associated with death, and we hear of the anger that stems from the confusion that comes with death. And we even hear of the stench of death...all of this to show that the promise of Jesus Christ is NOT only offered for us in death, the promise of Jesus Christ is offered in the midst of life...as it is...warts and all.

While this story within this Gospel lesson from John tells of the raising of Lazarus, this story also boldly confronts us with death itself and the life that exists with death and after death. Likewise, we see that death confronts Jesus as the human reality of death reveals his own death. It does so because Jesus interprets Lazarus' death in the context of his own life and death, just as it does for each of us. In the Gospel we hear this;

<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:32)

As a chaplain I have been face to face with this very situation but it is not expressed in the manner that both Mary and Martha say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," or as the crowd expressed it,

<sup>37</sup> ..."Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:37b)

No, Jesus couldn't. As a chaplain I heard this, how can God let something like this happen, or WHY would God let this happen to me, I go to church, I believe. I have also sat in the aftermath of a tragic death as the grieving person unleashes their anger at God. Martha and Mary are angry, the people who gather with them are angry, and surprisingly Jesus does not try to console them or sit in their grief, their anger, and their sorrow, rather, Jesus tries to explain this situation to them by saying,

<sup>23</sup> ... "Your brother will rise again." <sup>25</sup> ... "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:23b, 25b-26)

This is Good News, but it still does not take the death away...death remains. And this is what Jesus is attempting to explain to Mary and Martha. When Mary and Martha say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Jesus shows us by staying two days longer, that even if he was present, death is going to occur. When the disciples warn Jesus of the Jews who want to stone him, he says to them,

"Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. <sup>10</sup> But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." (John 11:9-10)

What Jesus is saying here is that the time for his work is limited, he too will die, his "hour" is coming and his work will not be hindered by the threat of death or death itself. And just as his pending death will not hinder his work, nor will his work hinder death itself...he will die a horrible death on a cross...for us. It is a part of who he is and it is a part of who we all are...through our faith. But the Good News is that our faith allows us to understand that Jesus works in every stage of life and all that comes with it and not just the end stage of it that we know as death.

The resurrection is a future promise, but we see in the entirety of this Gospel lesson that the light, the life, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is known here and now...it's called living our faith. I had the pleasure of attending a seminar while I was in seminary lead by a leading Johannine scholar by the name of Robert Kysar. I have mentioned him before in my sermons on John. He describes in his book on preaching John the understanding of living the resurrection here and now:

Faith is a personal trust in the sense that the believer trusts his or her life to Christ. That trust in God's revelation is what enables us to pass from the realm of the below and of the world to that which is not of this world and is (what we assume) above. It is the means of transition from phony self-understanding to authentic life – or what the Gospel calls "eternal life." Salvation in the fourth Gospel means above all allowing God's revelation in Christ to determine our self-understanding.<sup>1</sup>

In the *human authenticity* of Jesus Christ, we see that God so loved the world that He weeps for us, dies for us, and calls us all from death to life. How authentically do we live out our faith with others in the world right now as our lives are lived out?

We live our faith when we like the sisters of Lazarus send our messages of prayers to Jesus, Lord the ones you love are ill. We live authentically when we confess to God that we are in bondage to

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<sup>1</sup> Kysar, Robert. *Preaching John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. Chapter 2, "Theological Themes: The Heart of Johannine Thought," under the section, "Faith and Salvation," page 62. Parenthetical words are mine, added to the quote from this book.

sin and cannot free ourselves, and Jesus calls us from that certain death by saying, unbind them, and let them go. But in all of these verses and all of these words nothing happens until Jesus, uses these very ordinary and very commanding words, “Lazarus come out,” (v. 43). Jesus commands new life in the face of death that surrounds him and us, as he calls us all from that death by saying...come out. And so today, once again in the face of impending death, along with the anger, the sorrow, the confusion and commotion, and even the stench of *sin* that surrounds us all, we hear Jesus cry with a loud voice... “This is my body...this is my blood...DO THIS.” And in these ordinary and very commanding words along with the bread and wine is the promise of new life that accompanies our death. May this promise in Jesus in the face of death equip us to understand and to recognize the Good News offered to us in the midst of our authentic life.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*