

First Sunday of Lent - The Raising of Lazarus

February 18, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 104: 27-30; John 11: 1-45

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

“After Jesus healed the blind man, he went to Jerusalem for the festival of dedication (Hanukkah).” Rev. Tim Suttle sets the scene for us. “He was teaching in the temple & caused a huge scene. John’s gospel puts the moneychangers incident early on in Jesus’s ministry. On this trip to the temple, “The Jews” are at their frustrating [low]. “Tell us plainly, are you the Messiah?” (*John 10:24*) The gist of Jesus’s answer is “I’ve been doing all these signs; you only see what you want to see. So you cannot see I and the father are one.” (*John 10:25-30*)

So they try to arrest him. Jesus escapes across the Jordan, to the place where John the Baptist had been baptizing, which is not an [unimportant] detail... Jesus returns to the wilderness; the place where he was baptized by John, the place where he [spent 40 days in prayer and temptation]. The wilderness is the place of disorientation that leads to new orientation.”

“When we pick up the story, Jesus has just learned that his friend Lazarus is very sick. The way John tells the story, he’s making it obvious that it was weird that Jesus didn’t go right away. He doesn’t tell anyone, he doesn’t prepare to leave, or send a message saying, “Be there soon.” He just stayed in the wilderness while Lazarus died. Why the two extra days?”

This is Suttle’s theory: “Well, the geography tells the story. Where is he? He is in the wilderness. What is he [usually] doing in the wilderness? Praying & wrestling with the Father’s will. By now, Jesus’s conflict with the Jew[ish leaders] is heated. They have tried to [arrest him for a death sentence] at least twice.... Going back to Bethany was a risk. “... If Jesus goes to Jerusalem he’s going to likely set

events in motion what will end in his death.” In those wilderness days, it seems God reveals to Jesus that Lazarus is dead, and that it’s time to move toward Jerusalem. He tells his disciples “we’re going.”¹ The disciples go with him. Jesus will trade his life for Lazarus’s and eventually ours. AND Jesus will do the seventh of his signs in the gospel of John. What does is that seventh sign mean?

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, John points out that there were many Jews already there from Jerusalem, which was two miles away. Into the danger zone Jesus has come. Both Martha and Mary tell him, “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Anger? Grief? Profession of faith? All of the above? Who among us hasn’t spoken similar words to God when, despite prayers, the illness persist or another 17 die at a senseless school shooting. “Time has run out,” we think, “why didn’t you show up Lord?” In the world as we know it, time is limited and death is certain. In Bethany and at the tomb of Lazarus, we learn something different. We learn that for those who follow Jesus, neither time, illness nor even death define who we are because God is more powerful than all of them.

“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus asks Martha and us. I’m not sure Martha gives a straight answer. I’m not sure we would either. When life seems out of our control, we either don’t know what to believe OR... we desperately hold on to our belief in Jesus — Jesus who IS the resurrection and the life for us on this side of eternity, too. Not sure what to believe, dear Martha, dear Mary, dear us? Then remember this — Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out!” Where we cannot see light... when we don’t get the relief or way we want, that is NOT the time to let go of Jesus. God gave Jesus the power to raise Lazarus from the dead so Lazarus, Mary, Martha and all us could know we live in eternal life with God EVEN

NOW ---- whatever our circumstances or state of health or even at death. God is not missing or powerless, no matter what we are tempted to think.

“I knew a woman who suffered from a debilitating illness for many months,” Rev. Thomas Long wrote, “She languished in the hospital as doctors tried first one therapy and then another, but still she was in pain and still she was confined to her bed.

Every visit to her in the hospital, I prayed with her, and we prayed each time for healing. But the healing did not come. I prayed, on a number of occasions as I left her room, ‘Lord, please answer our prayers. Please come into her life and restore her to health so that she can be on her way.’”

But I remember the conversation we had one afternoon, as I sat by her bedside in the hospital, when she said to me, ‘Now, preacher, I want you to think with me about what it is that God has for me now.’

‘How do you mean, what God has in store for you now?’ I muttered.

‘Well, it looks like I am not going to be healed of this illness. But still, here I am. I am in a considerably weakened situation, but here I am. I can still talk. I can still think and care about people. So now I am wondering what God wants me to do now, in this situation. I am sure that, even if I am not healed of this illness, Jesus still expects me to be a disciple.’

I think that is a person who understood the sign Jesus performed at Bethany. Healed or not, she believed Jesus had hold of her. It wasn't time, or illness or even death that would decide how she would live her life. It was the power, love and promises of Jesus that would guide her and hold her steady. She was NOT living to die. She was living in Christ.

Long puts it this way, for most of us there is no way that we can avoid illness and there is no detour around death. We are human beings; illness and death are a part of being human. But what we CAN do is not let our human frailties or a fear of death jerk us around “and determine our destinies and the significance of our lives. Jesus will lead us to a different definition of abundant life” and meaningful ways to serve and thrive in whatever time we have.² We can walk toward Jesus when he calls us by name, “Lazarus, come out” or we can live in a tomb while we are still alive. We can live now in God’s new creation in which hope, justice and love never run out. Or we can live in the world of “if only you...” that binds us up with despair or bitterness.

You may be thinking, “I don’t know if I have that much faith?” or “I’m not that strong.” However, you’d be wrong. Mary and Martha weren’t sure what to believe. In a matter of days, the disciples would all flee and abandon Jesus. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus said. Because packed in that tiny seed is the strength of Father, Son, Holy Spirit that was poured into you at baptized. Then there is the forgiveness and power of Jesus that is yours each time you receive Holy Communion. Believe in Jesus who showed us that neither our limits nor death are stronger than our Lord is. That doesn’t mean there won’t be times of darkness, doubt or even anger at God when our prayers are not answered in the way or time we wish. Jesus had his struggles and words with God, too, in the wilderness and Gethsemane. That doesn’t mean you lack faith. It means you’re

human. But that's not all you are. "Come out, Lazarus" there's life and ministry and love still left for you. Come out and live your eternal life even now! Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 2/17/18

ENDNOTES

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1. Adapted from Tim Suttle's sermon, "Jesus Raises Lazarus" April 9, 2014
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2014/04/lent-5a-john-111-45-jesus-raises-lazarus-from-the-dead.html#uuglbbledZACxP5O.99>
 2. William Willimon, "Amid Sickness and Death: Life — "Proclaiming the Text" April 10, 2011
Pulpit Resources