

5 Lent A
March 29, 2020
John 11:1-45

The Church Reborn

Prayer:

I had a very interesting conversation this week, a conversation What next? What happens next when this is all over? What will we look like? Will we...even be?

Why the Sunday before Holy Week? Why do we hear the story of the death and raising of Lazarus the Sunday before we walk with Jesus from triumphal entry to cross to grave?

It is a given that we are creatures of habit. We love our routines, our traditions, our way of doing things “the way they have always been done.” This is not all bad. Routines and traditions have a way of ordering our day and lives. Heaven forbid that I start the day without that first two pots of coffee. You do not want to be around me before this! (and for the duration you don’t have to be 😊). We do things a certain way because over time it adds to efficiency and orderliness, and when we take things out of step, the universe will often feel like it is one bubble off plumb. Routines and traditions also have a way of identifying us. As a body we Lutherans are often defined “the frozen chosen,” often because of a skewed understanding of the form of worship we tend to practice.

But the opposite is also true. We are creatures of habit. We love our routines and our traditions, our way of doing those things in a certain way because “we’ve always done it this way.” It is at this point that we have moved beyond the usefulness of such ways of ordering our life to actually defining who we are by

But God calls us beyond the ordinary and the fixed...

The story of Jesus raising the dead appear in all the gospels. The raising of Lazarus is unique to John’s gospel.

What a year we have had in the last week! Compelled to consider entirely new ways of “gathering” for corporate worship, we are inundated with headlines, updates, and tweets that

read as if “church” can be cancelled like an outdated television series (can someone say cable TV?).

In these unpredictable times, one can expect inquiries about the good news. Is it possible to suggest, as did the ancient prophet Ezekiel, that the spirit of the Lord has brought us out and set us in the middle of the valley? This valley. A valley of disaster and death. Now don't stop reading there.

It might seem tempting to shift away from the lectionary this week, especially if there has been a death in the congregation or someone is gravely ill. How does one lead with a text that says Jesus hesitated when his healing hand could have saved? But if God is not good in the midst of sickness and sorrow, why acknowledge success and serenity as divine grace? Finding God's presence in the storm might be more faithful than expressing gratitude when things seem to all be going the way we want.

Rehearse the disappointment and despair of Lazarus' sisters. Rehearse the confusion and concern of the disciples. These may be the very posture of your listeners that should be affirmed this week. In your efforts to livestream encouragement, be intentional in offering empathy to those for whom Psalm 130 expresses the desperation of their hearts. From this position of shared misfortune, we can together watch and wait to see what the Lord is doing.

Allow the echo to remain that the promise is carried from within the community beyond the community. We tell these stories so that the world might know. But do not ignore that these are the stories of a particular community.

Within this community called Christ-followers, Jesus had cultivated an intimacy that allowed Mary and Martha to expect healing. The disappointment of the delay occurs within the expectation of a response. And even in this moment, they remain faithful. The complexity of emotions is real.

And there is the rub. Sometimes disappointment and faith coexist. Martha and Mary do not demand a fix. They continue to believe Jesus is the source of their hope. So—the focus of the text is not a pronouncement of survival principles, but signs of God's faithfulness to restore life in this world permeated with death and destruction. The signs restore our capacity to see God's faithfulness in the face of disaster.

In solidarity with a world where the threat of death is evident in political posturing, economic inequity, medical malpractice, individual isolation, regional rivalry, and denominational discord, God in Christ approaches the stench of our strife.

In faithfulness to God's desire to give humanity abundant life, Jesus calls us by name. Jesus does not speak to the dead man, or the brother of the mourners, or the one buried by the community. Jesus calls to Lazarus.

The repercussions of the raising of Lazarus are.... Then and now!

Jesus thanks God for hearing him, and how is Lazarus raised? By hearing Jesus. Like the sheep that recognize the voice of the shepherd who calls them by name (10:3), Lazarus hears his name being called, he recognizes the voice of the shepherd, and the dead man comes out, because only the shepherd can lead his sheep out.

Again we should ask, why does Jesus need to talk about the raising of Lazarus prior to doing it? Is it because that the sign would be easily misunderstood, even by us? When we think about the raising of Lazarus, do we place our focus on "I am the resurrection" and not remember that Jesus also says "I am the life?" Indeed, this is exactly what Martha thinks. Notice her dialogue with Jesus in 11:21-27. When Jesus says to her, "your brother will rise again," she hears only the promise of a future resurrection, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (11:24). And Jesus seems to correct this misunderstanding, "I am the resurrection and the life." But Jesus, we might ask, what is the difference?

Our first impressions may be the same. We tend to focus on the resurrection that we situate for ourselves as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. But what might it mean that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? That we are raised to life, not as future salvific existence, but to life right now, right here, with Jesus? For Lazarus, the Gospel does not describe his future with Jesus, but his present.

The raising of Lazarus also gives him new life with Jesus. This new life is leaning on the breast of Jesus (13:23), reclining at the table with him, sharing food and fellowship (13:28). New life in Jesus is this intimacy, this closeness, this dwelling, lying on the chest of Jesus. It is here and now, because for the Gospel of John, it is not just the death of Jesus but the life of Jesus that brings about salvation. For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, through which "we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16).