

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 5
March 26, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we have heard just now the rather lengthy gospel reading which tells the story of The Raising of Lazarus.

The Raising of Lazarus is the most powerful, healing miracle which Jesus performs during his earthly ministry.

More powerful than healing lepers.

More powerful than healing those who can't walk and those who can't see.

More powerful than healing any sort of infirmity.

For here we see Jesus bring back someone from the dead.

And not just someone.

No, Jesus raises his good friend Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus raises Lazarus, whom Jesus loved.

Now, Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. And Jesus shared a special relationship with these siblings.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that Jesus visits Mary and Martha.

And we may remember that during that visit, Jesus admonishes Martha who is preoccupied by her many tasks.

Meanwhile, her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens attentively to Jesus.

Strangely enough, Lazarus is not mentioned in this text.

And it is the house of these siblings where Jesus also stays when he travels to Jerusalem shortly before his death.

So, yes, Jesus shares a close relationship with these siblings.

And thus, we would assume that upon hearing of Lazarus's illness, Jesus would be hurrying to see Lazarus and his sisters.

But instead when Jesus is informed of Lazarus's illness, Jesus hesitates to see Lazarus.

All the more, Jesus comments that this illness does not lead to death.

That's strange, since Lazarus does indeed die.

But, Jesus may have meant that Lazarus's demise would not be an eternal death, for after all Lazarus is raised.

So, Jesus doesn't go to Lazarus right away, but instead he waits two days, and then, only after those two days have passed does Jesus go to see Lazarus.

Now, some Biblical commentators will note that Jesus doesn't go right away, in order to allow for Lazarus to die and to be buried, and to be in the tomb for FOUR days.

Why? Because according to Jewish tradition, an individual was not declared TRULY dead until the fourth day.

In the Jewish Talmud (a source of Jewish tradition) it says, "The whole strength of the mourning is not till the third day; for three days long the soul returns to the grave, thinking it will return (into the body); when however it sees that the color of its face has changed then it goes away and leaves it."

In other words, according to Jewish tradition, the soul hovers around the body for three days after death, hoping for re-entrance.

But once the body starts to decompose and the corpse changes color, the soul knows there is no going back and departs once and for all.

That was the Jewish tradition around this time.

It makes us think of that scene in the movie *The Princess Bride*, where Miracle Max played by Billy Crystal says that the hero, Wesley, is not dead, but only MOSTLY dead.

It also makes us think of the mechanism developed by Dr. Johann Gottfried Taberger in 1829, in which a buried corpse would have strings attached to its hands, head, and feet.

And the strings would be attached to a bell above the site in which the casket was buried in the ground.

And, thus, if the interred person should become alive again, he or she could alert the cemetery watchman by pulling on the strings and ringing the bell.

In other words, people in former times were not always so sure that a person who appeared dead was in fact truly dead.

And so, we get this detail about the four days in our gospel reading here.

Jesus waits for the allotted time to pass, so as we can be certain that Lazarus is truly dead.

And then, the gospel reading describes Jesus's use of some cryptic language.

Jesus talks about individuals walking at night and stumbling, while those who walk about during the day do not stumble.

And Jesus talks about death as if it is merely sleep.

And the text continues then with Jesus having arrived on the scene, and speaking with Lazarus's sister, Martha.

And a little later Jesus talks with Lazarus's other sister, Mary.

And notice that both sisters say to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And that statement from both women would appear to be laced with frustration.

It is something of a rebuke, "Where were you, Jesus? Don't you care? Don't you care that our brother was dying? You might have been able to save him."

And they would seem to have a point.

And notice, even the Jews who were with the Mary and Martha are frustrated.

In the text, they are asking as well, "Where was Jesus when we needed him?"

They say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

"Where was Jesus? Did he not care?"

But, it appears that even if Jesus had come immediately when informed of Lazarus's illness, Jesus still would NOT have been there in time to prevent Lazarus's death.

For the text says that Jesus waited two days, before beginning to go to Lazarus, and yet by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already been dead four days.

So, even if Jesus had started right off, he still would have been late by two days.

So, it would appear that Jesus knows that he can't get there in time to save Lazarus from death, and so he delays just long enough for four days to pass from the time of Lazarus's death, in order to show that Lazarus was really, truly, without a doubt dead.

It is kind of like that line in the Apostle's Creed which says, "He was crucified, died, and was buried."

That line is meant to emphasize that Jesus was dead, really dead, I mean really, really dead.

He was crucified, he died, and he was buried.

There is not even the remotest possibility that Jesus was only mostly dead.

Nor is there the chance that Lazarus was only mostly dead, for he has been dead four days.

But, here then is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, for what, pray tell, does Jesus hope to accomplish having allowed for Lazarus to be dead four days?

What does Jesus hope to do, now that he has finally arrived on the scene several days late?

The answer is found at the beginning of this text.

For Jesus explains to his disciples way back at the beginning of this text that the illness and subsequent death of Lazarus was for the purpose of God's glorification.

Did we hear that?

The illness and subsequent death of Lazarus was for the glorification of God.

Let me say that again, the illness and death of Lazarus was so that God could be glorified.

We may still not be getting that, so let me break it down.

The illness that Lazarus suffered, and the death he endured as a result of his illness was so that the power of God could be evident, and so that the people would praise God for God's grace.

PAUSE

Now, this is not to say, that God caused Lazarus to be stricken with illness nor with death.

That is not what I am saying at all.

No, the Gospel writer John is very clear that God does not inflict illness and death upon people in response to a person's sin or the sin of their parents.

The Gospel writer John had made that abundantly clear earlier in his Gospel, in the story of The Healing of the Blindman.

In John, chapter 9, Jesus' disciples are walking along and they see a man who had been blind since birth, and the disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?"

And Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents since; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

In effect, Jesus is saying illness and hardship in life, trial and tribulations, even death itself is not the consequence of a wrathful God who punishes his people for sin.

No, but the world is unfortunately imperfect.

People suffer not by any consequence for having done wrong in God's eyes, but simply because we live in a broken world where illness happens, where tragic events happen, where death happens.

But in the midst of such pain and suffering, God can bring about blessing, God can restore hope, God can instill healing.

And in so doing, God is glorified.

This is what Jesus is getting at when says that Lazarus illness and subsequently death can serve to bring about the glorification of God.

And this of course is the case, for when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, we read in this passage that “many who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”

Many who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Again, many who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

PAUSE

Glorifying God means to believe in God. It means to sing God’s praises. It means to extol God for his goodness.

To exalt in his Name. To declare with enthusiasm what God has done.

This is the glorification of God, and the raising of a man from death would certainly merit, certainly warrant that kind of response from those who witnessed the event.

That is what this story about Lazarus is about. It is about the glorification of God.

But notice that those who glorify God do so because they have witnessed, they have seen the power of God at work.

And for me, as a pastor, this is maybe the most important thing I do, that is to help people see the power of God at work in the world, because only then can people come to faith, only then can people be strengthened in their faith, only then can people know of hope in the world.

And so then the question before us...

The question this text, this passage, this story asks us, is this.

Where have we, where have you, seen the power of God at work in the world?

Where is God doing a similar thing as raising the dead, restoring life, casting off the death shrouds, and bringing about the promise of a new beginning?

Perhaps, there are relationships in your life that are in the process of changing for the better.

Perhaps, there are situations which are in the midst of improving.

Perhaps, there are challenges we are confronting and can't control, but with which we are learning to be at peace.

Perhaps, at present we are in the face of fear and trembling, but even so, we are drawing closer to God.

(Indeed, my hope is that in this time of our working together in ministry, we will see many times over the power of God at work, by what do together, and in our service to our neighbor.)

I wonder and I hope that in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves, we will be able to see the power of God at work.

I wonder and I hope that we will hear the voice of God crying out to us with a loud voice, "Come out."

Come out, and witness the power of God.

Come out, and see the power of God truly at work in your life and truly in the world around us.

And, when we see that power of God, may we be moved to glorify and give thanks to God.

Because, in doing so, we will have our own Lazarus moment.

When we see the power of God, and we are moved to glorify and give thanks to God...well, then, yes, we will have our own Lazarus moment.

We ourselves will have been raised from the dead, because we ourselves will have been empowered to believe.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

