

He Loves Us

John 11:28-44

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Chapel at 8, Sanctuary at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Though I've preached on the raising of Lazarus before, this time the passage really surprised me. Aspects of the account stood out more strongly to me in my study this week, which speaks to how our understanding of God's word grows with our experience of living as his followers.

The context is Jesus' personal relationship with the three siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who live in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. When Jesus visits their home, as related in Luke 10, Mary is favored in that Jesus says she has chosen the better part, to sit in his presence. But in this passage in John 11, Martha's faithfulness is lifted up. Even as she expresses her frustration that Jesus delayed coming once he learned that Lazarus was ill, she also declares her trust that God is present in Jesus' ministry.

After running out to greet Jesus she says, verse 21, *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.* That is when Jesus utters the words we often hear quoted in funeral services, *I am the resurrection and the life. 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?* In a way similar to Peter's confession of faith in Jesus, she replies, verse 27, *Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the Living God, the one coming into the world.*

Martha then goes to their house and tells Mary that Jesus has come. One gets a sense from the description here that Mary is more emotionally affected by her brother's death, at least by what can be observed. This fits with our sense of her personality, as one more sensitive than Martha, Martha being the more pragmatic of the sisters. Jesus recognizes strength and faithfulness in both, in different contexts. In her book, *The Way of Simplicity*, Esther de Waal quotes Abbot Aelred, who wrote, "It must be remembered that Martha laboured and Mary was free from work in the same house; in the same soul in whom Christ is welcomed, both lives are led, each in its own time, place and order."¹

Mary comes out of her house weeping, along with some of her neighbors, who were doing the right thing in coming to mourn with her, not unlike Jews do even today when they visit those who "sit *shiva*," at the death of a close relative. Jesus weeps with her. He has compassion. He enters into her suffering. Her neighbors recognize his compassion. *See how he loved him*, they say, and no doubt Mary experiences his love as well, as she witnesses his tears.

At this point the passage says something else that is interesting. In both verse 33 and 38, it says that Jesus was *greatly disturbed* and troubled. Some other translations of the Greek render the phrase to suggest a kind of righteous indignation. Eugene Peterson translates it as *a deep anger welled up within him*. So there is more going on in Jesus than sadness. It is worth noting that often the flip side of sadness can be anger, which can surface from an inward or outward struggle with an opposing force that appears to have victory over what we believe to be good and right.

I believe Christ feels such righteous anger, because he is living in two realms at once: the earthly realm we know and presume to understand, and the realm of God's kingdom, which he can see fully, but we see now only in part. Jesus' anger is directed toward the power of lies that still call to his followers, even when he has called them with the truth of God's promise, the truth of his word. This is a passage that concerns matters of life and death. The tragedy in it is not that death occurs, but that those who are close to Jesus, those who are devoted to him, those who trust in him deeply, have yet to recognize the full import of his identity as God's Son, the Messiah...even as they call him by that name. Some lies still hold sway and influence in this world.

In Chapter 10, beginning at verse 24, religious authorities at the Temple approach Jesus and say, *'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'* Jesus answered, *'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.'*

That phrase, *they will never perish*, helps us understand Jesus' statement that his followers will never die. While our bodies may die, in Christ we never perish, we are not lost to God. Death is not our end. Jesus has great, and I will say complete, compassion for his sheep, but his ministry on earth is one in which, even when they hear his voice, they do not always follow in confidence. Thus he makes the time, in the great forbearance of his love, to bring them along. This is the heart of his compassion as our Good Shepherd, to enter into our suffering on this earth, to confront the lies that oppress us, and to call us into his way of truth and life.

In John 10, verse 11, Jesus says, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for [his] sheep.* This is at the heart of the raising of Lazarus. Not merely that he was raised from death, which is powerful enough, but that in this miracle, God reveals his power in his Son, the power of the Shepherd God has sent to call out and lead his people. In Chapter 11, verse 42, Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven saying, *I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, that that they may believe that you sent me.* Here is his forbearance, his care expressed for us, and a sign of how he draws us into his own relationship with his Father even as he exercises his wrath on the power of death.

In *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, C.S. Lewis writes, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with him." There is that sense of his kingdom entering into this world. Lewis continues, "The real labour is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake." He adds pointedly at the end, "The presence which we voluntarily evade is often, and we know it, his presence in wrath."²

It is Jesus' exercise of wrath against the power of death that should awaken us in our reading of these verses, as it surprised and awakened Mary, Martha, and the others who witnessed the raising of Lazarus. It is startling how Jesus can shed tears of sympathy for his friends who mourn, with full knowledge that their mourning is ultimately without purpose. His tears are genuine, but they are not for the loss of Lazarus; they are for Mary and Martha, who mourn without full awareness of God's power in his Son, their friend. They have a victory they are not aware of. They are not yet fully awake to God's presence, even as they call for his presence in desperation to save their brother's life.

So the Shepherd calls one of his sheep from the sleep of death, *Lazarus, come out!* He calls that those still living might also awake. He calls Lazarus that those who believe, and those who do not yet believe, might know that he is God's Son, and that he is the resurrection and the life. John reports in verse 35 and following: *Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'* Encapsulated in those verses is the Gospel writer's summary of the divided response Jesus was getting from the people of his own faith, the Jews.

As a quick aside, it is true that John's repeated use of the term "Jews" in his Gospel has been abused over the centuries and taken as justification by some for persecution of Jews, even, sadly, by leaders and theologians of the church. It is important for us to remember, however, that Jesus was himself a Jew and was considered a rabbi. When he experienced opposition to his teaching and ministry, he experienced it from the only people around who could oppose him, outside of the Roman occupiers who, in truth, made every attempt to wash their hands of the religious concerns of the people they conquered and controlled.

The issue wasn't with Jews, as a category of people, but rather with how Jesus was influencing the practice of faith by people of his own tradition, and how the established religious authorities of that tradition were attempting to control Jesus' influence in the context of their own entanglements with Roman powers. "Jews" in John's Gospel can be read "God's people," including their leaders, some of whom were sincere in the practice of their faith, and some of whom were cynical and clung to power. Many, like us, were a mix of both, caught between two kingdoms.

They were caught between the Kingdom of the Temple, and the Empire of Rome. We are caught between the kingdom of this world, in which death appears to have the final say, and the kingdom of God, in which Jesus is given all authority in heaven and on earth, and who grants us, by faith, a life that shall not perish. There is a power struggle here, which grows entirely ugly, before redemption comes, and the redemption comes not through the avoidance of suffering, but through it. It is Christ who leads the way, a way we can trust to follow. This will be our journey through Lent.

It is this struggle, this trap, from which Jesus works to free us, whether we are, as Paul writes in Galatians 3, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ. *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

In a reading this week I came across a passage by Thomas Merton from *The Silent Life*, in which he speaks of detachment from the world, by which he means not a lack of engagement, but a lack of possession or control over the things we love.

I can't help but think the same is true for the people we love. It is a great gift to love someone; it is the greatest gift to entrust the life of one we love entirely to God, even unto death, with trust that they shall not be lost, they shall not perish. Merton writes, "As soon as we take them to ourselves...we have stolen them from God, they are no longer His, but our own."³

In life and death, we belong to God. This is a great mystery of our faith, that in releasing our lives and the lives of people we love to God, we are awakened to our life beyond the grave, and to the great love God has for us in Christ. The victory is won by Christ, and granted us all by faith.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Esther de Waal, *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 85.

2 C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1963), 75.

3 Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 27.