

Lent V – March 9, 2008

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Jesus and Lazarus – John 11:1-44

In the Gospel of John, Jesus exudes hope. *Despite* increasing danger; *despite* accusations of blasphemy; *despite* constantly clueless disciples, with serene, irenic hope Jesus keeps proclaiming who he is. *I am the bread of life. I am living water. I am the Good Shepherd.* Jesus is spiritually hope-filled about who his Abba is and about what friends can do for one another. He is truly hope-filled about the power of love to transform lives and about the ways in which hospitality creates community. In today's Gospel, we've that again. But with a twist. And for Jesus, it is a life-changing, ministry-making twist. In today's Gospel we encounter Jesus, proclaimer of hope *and also* bearer of grief. In today's Gospel, we meet who Christ fully is, and this is good news.

He gets a message: the one whom he loves is ill. *Jesus proclaims hope:* "This illness does not lead to death...it is for God's glory." Two days pass and Jesus decides, now is the time to go to Bethany. Now, his disciples are freaked. They've been chased out of the region under threat of stoning and

don't want to have to go there again. *Jesus proclaims hope*: hope in the living light that will guide their footsteps. (Thomas gets inspired with it, so inspired he's ready to get stoned along with Jesus!) They make it safely past Jerusalem and onto Bethany. It has been four days since the one whom Jesus loves has died. And the grief is palpable. Friends of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary have gathered. There has been weeping and wailing, rending of garments, visitations to the tomb. Martha hears that Jesus is on the road, and she goes out to meet him. She has some confronting to do. She has expectations. *And Jesus proclaims hope*. He doesn't get defensive about her accusation that had he been there, Lazarus would not have died. He says: "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus proclaims a living hope for right now, not just for the "last day." Martha goes back to Mary, who is enveloped in grief, and who brings all of it to the feet of Jesus. People have followed her, thinking she's making her way to Lazarus' tomb, and so they are all there, as Mary cries out again like her sister before her: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary weeps. Her friends weep. *And Jesus does not proclaim hope*. Something has happened. Greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, he does not proclaim, but asks a question: "Where have you laid him?" And the friends respond with the same words Philip, the Samaritan woman, and also Jesus have said before:

“Come and see.” *And then, Jesus weeps.* It is a startling moment. Jesus, steady source of hope, the One who is One with his One, weeps. Awe and ridicule ensue. But his grief continues. Still greatly disturbed, Jesus goes to the tomb.

But by the time he gets to the cave and asks for the stone to be taken away, something is again at work. In the midst of grief, hope is breaking forth. In the face of reeking and rotting death now four days in the making, hope springs eternal: this *is* for God’s glory. Perhaps with still tear-stained cheeks, Jesus prays and then shouts aloud: “Lazarus, come out! Unbind him, and let him go.”

The preacher Fred Craddock has written that in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ journey to Bethany and his raising of Lazarus is like the *other* Gospels’ story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.¹ In that garden, on the night of his arrest, Jesus is in agony, coming to terms with what it means for him to be who he is. John either didn’t know or chose not to tell the garden story. For John, it is on the road to Bethany and then before Lazarus’s tomb where Jesus comes to terms with what it means for him to be who he is. This *is* for

¹ See Craddock, Fred B., "Jesus Wept: John 11:32-44," *Journal for Preachers*, 2000, p. 37

God's glory. And in calling out Lazarus from his tomb, he is readying *himself* to enter his own.² After that day, John tells us in v. 54 that "Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews." He would go near the wilderness with his disciples and then return to Bethany for Passover, and from there—from that place of both grief *and* hope—he would descend into the valley of violence and death.

The journey that Jesus makes—from the Jordan to the Bethany road to the tomb of Lazarus is a journey from hope, through grief, and into hope again—and it is the journey that God makes with us every moment of our lives. Jesus' encounter with his disciples and friends reveals who God is—with us and for us. John's Gospel proclaims that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and Word was God. And this Word is Christ. The apostle Paul speaks of Christ as the Wisdom of God.³ Wisdom, too, as our Scriptures express, was in the beginning with God.⁴ And Matthew proclaims that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.⁵ And this God who-is-with-us is a living God of hope. And this God who-is-with-us grieves and weeps, too.

² *ibid.*, p.38

³ I Cor 1:24b: "Christ the power of God and the *wisdom* of God."

⁴ See Proverbs, esp. 3:19a: "The LORD by wisdom founded the earth"

⁵ Matthew 1:23

And I'll tell you what. This is good news. This is who God in Christ fully is. And this is good news I have to believe in...

I have to believe that Jesus weeps with the mother and father of a stillborn baby, so loved and longed for. I have to believe that Jesus weeps at the bedsides of the sick and diseased. I have to believe that Jesus weeps with the families of seminary students killed in Jerusalem and the 120 killed in Gaza this week. I have to believe that Jesus weeps with families whose sons', brothers', and husbands' bodies are left dead and decaying in Afghani fields after Taliban brutality. I have to believe that Jesus weeps with children abused and neglected; with women and men whose jobs are lost or pay so little there's never making ends meet; with people caught in depression and mental illness. I have to believe that Jesus weeps with the whole creation that is indeed groaning.

With whom must you also believe Jesus weeps? For whom do you grieve, with whom do you suffer? And do you trust that Jesus is there, too? Jesus journeys with us through the grief of our lives and this world. And he never stops there...

Because Jesus didn't stop on that road to Bethany and only weep. He kept walking. Still greatly disturbed, he kept moving, making his way to that reeking presence of death. And then he was able to go through the grief and into hope again. That is the ultimate good news. That is Christ fully with us.

And so I have to believe that the mother and father of a stillborn baby will heal and hope again; that the people of Jerusalem and Gaza Strip will break the cycle of revenge; that the families of men slaughtered will see peace; that children harmed will experience safety; that people whose jobs aren't enough will find justice; and that the mentally ill will be released from bondage.

God is with us, and God call us who believe that Jesus is the "resurrection and the life" to be bold proclaimers of hope and also bearers of grief, knowing that we do not go it alone. As the Body of Christ, we are called to tell others that God is not some distant power beyond it all. Because of Jesus, we know that God is in the thick of it, walking with us through it, promising to bring us out and into the light. As the Body of Christ, we are

called to be a part of that promise by living lives, speaking words, doing deeds, and praying prayers of hope for God's whole creation.

Let us keep the Psalmists' words on our lips: *We wait for you, O Lord. Our souls wait. In your word is our hope.*⁶ Amen

⁶ Psalm 130:5 (adaptation)