

Lent 5 (John 11:1-45)

- Vv. 1-6: How does it change the way we see our failures, our limitations, and our death, when we look, not for suffering, but for the glory of God? The first act of faith in this story is Jesus' willingness to wait. When have you been able to wait, even when every circumstance screamed that you were in crisis?
- Vv. 7-16: The second act of faith in this story is Thomas' willingness to follow Jesus even without seeing a way that things can work out. When have you acted out of loyalty to Christ, even when you were pessimistic about the outcome?
- Vv. 17-27: The third act of faith in this story is Martha's readiness to trust her insight and to assert her belief. When have you pushed through your caution and become willing to make an extravagant claim about God's goodness and Christ's role in your life?
- Vv. 28-32: The fourth act of faith in this story is Mary's willingness to voice disappointment and sorrow when God's good will seems to fail and leave her bereft. When have you faced the testing of your trust and brought to God your resentment and grief at God's apparent delay and neglect?
- Vv. 33-37: The fifth act of faith in this story is Jesus' openness about his own grief, recognizing the burden of suffering and loss to which Martha and Mary and Lazarus have been subjected. How do you grieve with God over the suffering of the world?
- Vv. 38-45: The sixth act of faith in this story is Jesus' gratitude that God always hears him, knowing that he wills what God wills. How do you come to know God's will for you, so that asking for God's will to be fulfilled is an act of thanksgiving for the fact that God always hears you?

The story of the raising of Lazarus is the climactic miracle in the Gospel of John. Several things point to this.

First, it consolidates the opposition to Jesus. The Jewish leaders convene and plan to put Jesus to death as soon as they hear of this miracle (John 11:53). In fact, the Jewish leaders decide that they ought to kill Lazarus as well, to “remove the evidence” of Jesus’ divine identity (John 12:10-11).

Second, it is the occasion for Martha’s confession of faith, which summarizes what every believer is to affirm. (Peter gets to make this proclamation in the Synoptic Gospels.) Martha states that she believes Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 11:27). The only statement that tops that in this Gospel is Thomas’ acclamation when he sees and has the opportunity to handle the Risen Jesus: “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). John gives those crucial lines to a woman and the so-called “skeptic.”

Third, it touches on the greatest uncertainty, even terror, that remains for the Christian: death. Are we abandoned at that moment by God? The story allows that discomfort its full expression: both Martha and Mary state on behalf of all of us, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21 & 32). Are we inaccessible after that to God? Martha protests at the opening of Lazarus’ grave; there is nothing to expect from that place but “stench” (John 11:39). It seems clear that the death of believers before Jesus’ second coming was traumatic for the Christian community within which John wrote this Gospel. Paul, remember, deals with the same anxiety in his letters: what will happen to the Christians who have died?

What John shows Jesus doing is significant. When Jesus raises others from death in the Synoptic Gospels, physical contact is emphasized (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:14-15; even the terrifying moment in Mark 9:26-27). In the Gospel of John, all Jesus does is call with a loud voice (John 11:43). This is not because Jesus is not physical in this Gospel. When he heals the man born blind, Jesus spits into the dirt, makes mud, smears it on the man’s eyes. At the last supper, he will handle and wash the feet of everyone in the room. But John seems to want to underscore that, when we are dead, our physical inaccessibility and decomposition do not matter, because what operates is God’s Voice—Jesus is, after all, the incarnate Word. That is what will bring us back to life.

Jesus’ own grief at Lazarus’ tomb is heart-stopping. John tells us Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved;” he “began to weep,” and once he arrives at the tomb, he is “again greatly disturbed” (John 11:33-38). The Greek phrases suggest that Jesus is agitated, in emotional upheaval, in turmoil, not “unhappy.” Debate about these phrases has gone on ever since the Gospel began to be interpreted. Was he pretending to grieve, in order to weep with those who were mourning? Was he upset because others were grieving, because of their lack of faith? These seem to me trivial and demeaning interpretations.

I offer you two considerations. First is to consider the humanity of Jesus. John insists that Jesus is the Divine Word made flesh; so it is easy to think that the raising of Lazarus shows us Divine Power restoring life just as it created life. But who knows if this story doesn’t retain some strand of historical memory of what it cost Jesus, the human being, to carry out God’s saving intentions? Mark describes Jesus’ disturbance and physical symptoms as he works some miracles (Mark 1:41; 3:5; 7:34). Even given Jesus’ confidence about raising Lazarus (John 11:41-42), human intention and energy and effectiveness is being strained to its limit. What level of physical stress might have been

involved in calling someone back to life? And isn't it likely that this unflattering depiction of distress and effort would not have been invented, but remembered by those who were awed and moved by the intensity with which Jesus gave himself to bring about God's mighty acts?

Second is to consider the divinity of Jesus. Is it possible that God grieves over human mortality? Is it possible that individual deaths are for God an occasion of sorrow? This opens up the disturbing question of why God doesn't repair what is so damaged. We are given no answer to that question. Instead, what we do see clearly, what is given to us as the "Good News" of the four Gospels, is that God, when with us, did not avoid death, but joined us in undergoing it. It is as if, in some way, this transit from life to death is what it means to be human: we know we will die. And it is this knowledge and terror that God chose to know with us *as we know it*, from the inside. Jesus knew the loss of someone he loved (John 11:3, 5, 36) and he knew the loss of his own self (John 19:30). We will not find ourselves anywhere that God has not already gone before us, even death. Of course, after this miracle, all that is left for Jesus is Good Friday.