

Lent 5
The Raising of Lazarus
John 11: 1-45
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The raising of Lazarus is a Big Story. It takes place at a pivotal place in John's narrative. The action has begun to intensify; Jesus has just narrowly escaped stoning, and he will soon make his triumphal, if short-lived, entry into Jerusalem. For the writer of John the raising of Lazarus is the last straw for the authorities in determining the threat that Jesus carries. In the other gospels it is his actions in the temple of throwing out the money changers. The raising of Lazarus is unique to this Gospel alone, the Gospel where we find layers and layers of metaphor and symbol in each story.

The primary goals of this story in John is to display Jesus' power as well as give us a glimpse of what is to come for him as he nears the time of his crucifixion.

John conveys his point with a richness of texture and detail that makes this a particularly compelling text. The story is dense with movement and meaning, and it offers an extravagance of entry points for reflection.

I am intrigued by the web of relationships among the participants in this text. There are Mary and Martha, whose story is bound together with the unbinding of their brother, and who foreshadow the presence of women at another tomb that lies not too distant. I am curious about the friendship that these siblings shared with Jesus, how their home in Bethany seems to have been for Jesus a particular place of hospitality, comfort, familiarity, and, as John points out, love.

There is Thomas, seemingly destined to forever carry the title "Doubting Thomas," who ought to be better known as the one who, in this story, demonstrates his willingness to die with Jesus.

There is Jesus, whose presence in the story is marked by waiting and weeping.

And then there is Lazarus. Though the story hinges largely on him, for most of it he is a passive background figure. We never hear his voice, and it is only at the end of the story that he finally becomes really interesting, when he is faced with the choice of whether or not to come out of the tomb.

This story is one of my favorites, not just because it's a Big Story but because of the way that so many stories come together within it. This is not just Jesus at the height of his powers, showing off what he is capable of; this is Jesus reaching into the depths of who he is, pouring himself out on behalf of those with whom he is most intimately in relationship. Jesus enacts Lazarus' raising, but he does so in the context of a community. Jesus calls Lazarus forth, but he calls upon those

around Lazarus—sisters, kinfolk, neighbors—to unbind him and let him go. We say it takes a village to raise a child well it takes a village to raise Lazarus.

The raising of Lazarus is indeed a Big Story. It unfolds, however, in the context of patterns of relationships, choices, habits, and personalities that influence how each character participates in and responds to Lazarus' raising.

Our own lives are built on these same details.

We each garb ourselves in routines and practices that carry us through our relationships, our work, our hungers, our lives. Those routines and practices influence how we receive and respond to God's call. We may be swathed in layers of habits that may have once fit us, habits we may once have found beautiful, habits we may yet be attached to long past their usefulness but which now insulate and shroud us from the presence of God.

The season of Lent beckons us to reckon with our most entrenched habits as individuals and communities and consider where we may hunger for freedom from the grave clothes – from habits, routines, beliefs, relationships, resentments, ways of functioning in the world that no longer fit, that bind us and keep us from living wholly in the present.

When Jesus called out to Lazarus with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11.43)---

I wonder if it gave him pause.

Jan Richardson writes:

"I wonder if Lazarus, stirring in his four-day tomb and beginning to feel the grave clothes weighing on his waking skin, had to take a moment to consider.

When he heard that cry from beyond the threshold of his tomb; when he awoke to that strangely familiar voice ---when that command came and challenged the dead calm of the grave, did Lazarus give a thought to staying put?

...Was he tempted to simply roll over and turn his face toward the wall so that he could continue his slide into decay? (It is often easier to just keep doing what you have always done, the familiar might be hell but at least it is familiar)

Nobody goes into the tomb to pull Lazarus out;

no one crosses into his realm to haul him to this side of living.

Lazarus has to choose whether he will loose himself from the hold of the grave: its hold on him, his hold on it. Only when Lazarus takes a deep and deciding breath, rises, returns back across the boundary between the living and the dead:

only then does Jesus say to the crowd, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Not until Lazarus makes his choice does the unwinding of the shroud begin, and the grave clothes fall away.

(We cannot rescue people from their tombs – we can offer resources, we can lend a hand, but only they can take that first step towards the light)

As we consider this Big Story of Lazarus, I ask you some of the questions I have been carrying for myself this week:

In your daily living, what patterns are life-giving and help you notice the presence of God? Which habits keep you bound? What helps you hear the voice of Christ who stands at the threshold between death and life? What will help you choose to come forth, and to help someone else do the same? Are there people who can help with the unbinding?

This Big Story of Lazarus beckons us to see that as Jesus calls to Lazarus, he calls also to us. Do you hunger for freedom? Will you allow the voice of love to beckon you towards release?

Let us pray...

(Central resource for this message came from the blog of Jan Richardson on Lazarus)