

“Lazarus”

Text: John 11: 1-45

Prayer: Loving God, give us ears to listen and hearts to understand. This story about to unfold in our hearing is difficult and harsh. Break it open to us, so we may see ourselves in this story of faith. Amen.

His name is Lazarus - the man famous for dying and coming back to life. His name is a shortened Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, meaning "God helps." Some rabbinic tales feature Eleazar walking in disguise on the earth and reporting back to Abraham on how the people are observing the Torah regarding the treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the poor. In today's story in John, Lazarus is from Bethany, a town whose name means "House of Affliction." Scholars believe that ancient Bethany was the site of a house for the poor and a place of care for the sick. This Lazarus in John is totally unrelated to the parable of the unnamed rich man and the beggar Lazarus in the gospel of Luke. John's Lazarus had two sisters – Martha and Mary - the same Martha and Mary who hosted social gatherings and dinners for Jesus and his friends.

Today, we are hauling Lazarus out of his grave. There are several ways of how we deconstruct the details of this story. One style is a literalist approach - that Jesus, who was portrayed by John as being one with God, is a miracle worker who could raise the dead to life in its literal sense. Others will use a historical contextual method. One that is recommended by scholars like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and John Shelby Spong. Those who use this approach research biblical details such as the history of the community that produced the text; and the political, religious and cultural contexts of the first century. Others will focus more on a particular detail in the text and relate it to something that is going on in the world. Earlier this week, I traveled back to reading scholars and sermons pointing to Lazarus' grave, sniffing for an inspiration to make this story relevant to our hearing today. I must say that the members of the lectionary group have equipped me once more with wisdom and understanding.

For me, I consider the story of Lazarus as a parable of life and death. A parable. A story. A strange tale. Some Biblical scholars call this a dress rehearsal for the events soon to come for Jesus - his death and resurrection. Some call this a parable about the nature of friendship and

love, and some call it a story about the signs of new life that emerges from the pangs of death. To understand this story as a metaphor is to step into the world and theology of the gospel writer John, which is so different from Matthew, Mark & Luke. John spends a lot of time writing about signs or miracles to point to something deeper, more profound than the story might mean, beyond its ordinary meaning. For John, Abba, God and Jesus co-existed from the beginning of time. Jesus, the logos, the Word is God incarnate in the flesh so that human beings may know, touch, see, smell and taste the presence of God. John uses seven signs to show God's power through Jesus Christ. The finale of these signs is the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Alyce Mackenzie tells us that John repeatedly uses the physical realm as a metaphorical pointer to the spiritual realm. John portrays Jesus as the Living Water, the Bread of Life sent from Heaven, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Gate to Abba Father, the True Vine and in this story of Lazarus, the Resurrection and the Life. In our traditional understanding of Christianity, there is a lot of emphasis on life after death - we call it the afterlife. We sing of the "sweet by and by" and "when we all get to heaven - what a day of rejoicing that will be." All great religions provide us with meaning beyond our day to day life, and strive to describe the afterlife. The Jewish faith tells us about the Promised Land of milk and honey. Buddhism reminds us of the Great Wheel of Life. Islam describes the doors to Paradise. Jesus invites us to consider the remarkable power of life here and now—full, rich, deep, whole and everlasting. Jesus called that life, Eternal Life, describing for us a quality and depth of living that begins now, in the lives we live and will continue through death. "I have come," Jesus says, "so that you might have life and have it more abundantly." For John, Jesus' notion of eternal life is not the length of time or a quantifiable element. Eternal life is a quality of life that Jesus offers through his teachings and example. A life that is abundant and life-giving.

Eternal life is life in the process, if you will - one that upholds love, peace, justice, compassion and humility. It is a life free from being bound up in fear, from violence and suffering. It is life in the evolutionary process of justice. Express it however you want, as long as you remember that it is about life here and now, and not in some other place after life is done. As much as this

story is about Lazarus, it's also about us. Because we are all Lazarus. We experience death in many ways. We are wrapped up corpses, bound in the grave clothes which the world lays on us. We are stiff and we smell. I love the King James Version of Martha's reply to Jesus: "But my Lord, he stinketh!" Like Lazarus, there are times we stinketh. In the dark of failed relationships, futile programs for happiness, disastrous dreams of beauty and happy endings, we stinketh.

There was a churchgoer named Stinky Moe. He was a homeless man, unemployed, and often sick. He would occasionally show up at church. He liked the air conditioning, the pot-luck meals, the coffee time and the celebration of communion. On this particular Sunday he sat down right in front of Jack. When the children gathered for the Children's Story, Jack's son passed right behind Stinky Moe. "Dad, something smells," he said in a loud four-year-old voice. "Billy," Jack whispered, "come sit down." "Something stinks! What is it?" Billy continued. "Let's just scoot down here," Jack whispered. "Do you smell it too Dad," Billy asked. "Yes." "Well, what is it?"

If Jack had been honest, really honest, he would have said, "that is the smell of homelessness and poverty. That is the smell of hunger and loneliness. That is the smell of alcoholism and illness and isolation. That is the smell of one who has no place to bath and, in many ways, no reason to live. That is the smell of death. In Stinky Moe, the smell of death seemed more real than the fragrance of life. So most of us stayed away afraid that the stink would get on us. What we did not know, did not want to know or admit, is that it was already within us. All of us. Stinky Moe was just more open about it.

If we really looked at our lives, we would have seen the reality of death. It was there in hurts and pains, in our divorces and broken relationships, in our wounds and betrayals, in our fears, in our anger and resentment, in our addictions, in our sorrow and despair, in our excessive busyness and preoccupation with success, in things done and left undone. Death wraps around us like strips of cloth, and it stinks. It permeates our lives and our world. We want to avoid death as much as possible. We just wanted to move straight to Easter Sunday without passing through Good Friday. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Martha and Mary said. But Jesus wasn't there, at least not in the way they wanted. He wasn't there for a

purpose, so that they and we might believe. Believe in what? The fragrance of life is greater than the stench of death. Jesus challenges us over and over again to trust the fragrance of life even in the midst of death.

Lazarus' story is the story of our own walk, our own conversations, our own questions about life and death and human frailty. I think John was telling us to listen to that voice which gives us life. Lazarus was dead. Until - Jesus calls him out of the tomb. Until Jesus orders everything that binds him and holds him down is stripped off and tossed aside. When Lazarus came out of that tomb, he became a new creation. He was transformed. Like the blind man seeing again, like Nicodemus being born again. Like the Samaritan woman finding a spring of water that made her visible once more. In the entombed hopeless reality of life's darkness, Lazarus heard a voice. "Lazarus, come out!" That voice is the voice of love, of compassion, of justice, of life. The good news of the story is that, like Lazarus, God in Jesus loves us, weeps for us and with us. God is deeply moved by us. God brings life to our death, freedom to our bondage, and a shining light to our every darkness. Lazarus is what happens when death collides with life.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had invited a Lazarus to lunch one day? What if we helped a Lazarus come back to life? What if we find Lazarus at an AA meeting, or the social services that could have provided medical care, guaranteed livable income, a place to live, food to eat, a welcoming church? What if we say, "Lazarus, tell me your story. I am here to listen! I want to know about you." I think I know what would have happened. Lazarus will be brought back to life. Jesus calls us to break out of the tombs we build for ourselves. Jesus calls us to walk outside the safe places, to take risks without being afraid to colour outside the lines. Jesus calls us to be life-givers like him. Remember this well. When Lazarus stepped out of that tomb, there were family and friends at hand to help him get out of his grave clothes, to support him and love him. That's what this congregation is about: to help others get unbound. Amen.

Sources: BCUC Lectionary Group, Life in the Face of Death: The Story of Lazarus by Shelly Dieterle, firstchurchberkeley.org
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