

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 9, 2008

Lenten 5A 2008

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the 5th Sunday in Lent and it immediately precedes Palm Sunday which will be the start of Holy Week. The Church calendar, by keeping time differently, reminds us that as Christians we are called to have a different perspective on life and time than much of the world that surrounds us. Our Gospel lesson today is again from John and is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus. Interestingly, the story of Lazarus is found only in John and the event, according to John, is the immediate cause for the Jerusalem authorities to start planning Jesus' death. It also serves as a prequel to the account of Jesus' own death and resurrection.

In the three Synoptic Gospels, it is Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and driving out the money changers that starts the plot on his life. Gospels are not newspaper accounts of facts. Though in narrative form, Gospels seek to tell the theological truths about a given community's experience of their own encounter with Christ. John's narrative is so different because his community lived in very different times and circumstances. This may be upsetting to some, but it helps me understand why today we have so many different expressions of Christian belief. The Good News is Christ Himself – and each generation and every group of people are called to give witness. To their experience of Christ in their lives and communities. In today's lesson, Jesus receives word that his good friend Lazarus is ill. He says that it will not lead to

death but God's glory and, unlike a good friend, he dawdles there for 2 more days. When he announces his plans to return to Judea, where he has just been attacked, his disciples object. Thomas exclaims, perhaps caustically, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." When Jesus gets to the vicinity he learns that Lazarus has already been dead four days. (This is important since Jews believed the spirit hovered near the body for 3 days but by the fourth day death was certain.)

We now enter several emotionally heavy scenes – something unusual in Gospel stories. Jesus encounters Martha on the way to Lazarus. She says, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know God will give you whatever you ask of him." Are these words of anger and disappointment or faith or maybe both? When Jesus assures her Lazarus will rise, she can only refer to the resurrection on the last day. Jesus responds, "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?" Martha replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah." A very good answer, but not exactly responsive to the question asked. What Martha and her community knows limits what she is able to imagine or perceive.

When Jesus encounters the other sister, Mary, he again hears the words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This was surrounded by weeping and ritual wailing. Jesus, himself, cries and then, "*greatly disturbed*", came to the tomb. What disturbed him? We don't know. Perhaps it was the despair of the mourners, their all too human sense of time and being that could not see a reality beyond our physical deaths. It was their pain that Jesus felt and it disturbed him. I think Jesus was disturbed at how the mourners allowed their own emotions, human and valid though they were, to totally eclipse their faith. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus, speaking at

the Last Supper, refers to his impending death and notes, “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take that joy from you.”

So what are we to make of this Gospel story? Is it a straightforward miracle story? Is it a metaphor? Did it really happen as written? Whatever the answers to those questions may be, I think first and foremost it is a theological statement about God. Did you notice that Martha, when informed of Lazarus’ being raised, immediately went to a “somewhere, someday over the rainbow” eschatological future of the Last Day. Jesus shows that God is ready, willing and able to do more than we can imagine for us right now in the reality of our lives. Just as God showed the prophet Ezekiel that He could reconstitute and breath new life into the broken and conquered nation of Israel whenever he wished, Jesus showed Martha and Mary and the mourners that God’s saving power is available not only on the Last Day but is present now in the world.

If that is true, then what are we afraid of? St. Augustine once wrote that everyone is afraid of the death of the flesh, few of the death of their souls. He goes on to note that in laboring to avoid death we labor for no great purpose – only to delay death for a while but not to escape it. He exclaimed, “Oh that we should love the life that is within us right now as much as we fear the life that will someday pass away.”

By raising Lazarus, Jesus showed that not only will the God who was at our beginning be at our end, but that the Living God is present and working in our lives right now! In the midst of the pain and loss that happens in life, we often lose sight of this. But our losses and pain do not negate God’s power. The authorities in Jerusalem

caught on quickly enough. This man Jesus, this agent of the divine power of giving life itself, had to be stopped.

I sometimes like to ask questions to see if you have listened closely to the Gospel as it was being read. So here's one for you. Did you notice that Jesus did not go into the tomb? No! He called out to Lazarus to come out! It was up to Lazarus to respond and get up and come out. Our biblical God always seems to work that way – God doesn't do it for us, but gives us the power and is there to work with and through us. God gave Noah the information, but Noah had to act. God gave Abraham the promise, but Abraham and Sarah had to saddle up the camels and leave. God gave Moses the staff and the power, but Moses had to strike the Red Sea with it. So in these last weeks of Lent let's ask ourselves when and why are we afraid to respond at times? What are we avoiding? What do we need in our lives that we are afraid to ask for? Our society seems lately to be full of avoidance. We avoid relationships that require work. We complain the stories we heard in Sunday school as children no longer are sufficient, but we avoid the work of prayer and study to build a deeper adult faith or we avoid adult reality and embrace the myths of childhood as all encompassing.

Here's another question for you. Did you notice that Jesus did not unbind Lazarus? No! He commanded others to do this! This, too, seems to be the way our biblical God works. Somehow, we humans, however imperfect we may be, always seem to have a part in God's works. The Church is built on the premise that we each have a role in removing that shackles that bind us. So these last weeks in Lent let's ask ourselves what shackles have been removed in our lives that had bound and

limited us and who helped unbind them? Whose shackles are we called upon to unbind?

The story of Lazarus is John's way of telling us a great truth: that God is always present whatever our hurts may be. Even death cannot remove God's power from us and what could be more hopeful than that. No wonder the authorities were frightened when they caught onto the power of Jesus.

Amen.