

Welcome to the 5th Sunday of Lent. We have traveled some ground since Lent first began and it's worth pausing today for a short review of that ground and the strangers we've met along the way.

Our first Sunday we heard the story of Jesus' temptation by the tempter in the Wilderness. By the end of that story, Jesus has become well acquainted with this tempter and the two names he goes by. We read Matthew's account of Jesus' experience on that first Sunday, but we've heard from the Gospel of John every Sunday since.

The second Sunday we met Nicodemus under the cover of night. A Pharisee, full of knowledge but in need of help to believe. Jesus answered his knowledge with images and purposes - "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... not to condemn the world, but to save it."

The third Sunday, we met with Jesus the Samaritan woman at the well - an outsider to her people. Jesus makes of her the first apostle, sent to her own people, by "seeing" her fully and quenching her thirst for living water.

Last week, we met another unnamed stranger known only by his affliction - "blind from birth." He receives his sight from Jesus but goes on his own journey from the pool learning to speak of who Jesus is and what he had done in the man's life. From the margins of society, he worked at articulating a faith that grew from the waters at which he had washed and received his sight.

Thus far, strangers all, brought to light.

In our gospel reading today, we meet another someone. But this one is no stranger - he is a beloved friend of Jesus' named Lazarus. We don't meet him until the end of the story but it's around him that the story revolves. His sisters Mary and Martha are friends of Jesus as well and they play key roles not only in the events here, but in revealing their significance in the scene that immediately follows our reading. Though it's yet to happen, that scene is referenced in the second verse.

Lazarus was gravely ill and Jesus was nearby, so the sisters send a message to Jesus that he should come immediately. But come Jesus does not. Rather, he stays where he is another two days before setting out.

It's here that we are reminded of yet another stranger to add to the list. Bethany was in Judea, where religious leaders were intent on "silencing him." Jesus names the stranger outright - "**Lazarus is dead.**" Death, the unwanted guest, the stranger that has ratcheted up the tension we hear in brewing already in this story: All the puzzlement and assumptions of the disciples and Martha, their confusion and misunderstanding, the miscommunications and even denial - death brings and more when it comes near. The presence of this stranger, despite all our efforts to keep him far from us, has made himself known, reminding us just how familiar he is.

Still on the way to Bethany, Martha and Mary run to meet Jesus, and Mary speaks the truth of it: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Have you ever asked this or a similar question? Asked why Jesus hadn’t been there? The anguish of such a question is familiar too, isn’t it? “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this one from dying?” One of the great mysteries in Lutheran theology is the two-fold truth that God is always found in suffering, and that God is most hidden (most difficult to see) therein. The pain of this mystery is expressed first by Martha and then Mary - would that you had been here, Jesus.

But at the same time, hear not only the anger, but the faith of that statement. They know that had he been there, it could have been different. Faith in this man persists for these sisters, as angry as they might be.

Once Jesus finally gets there, far too late for any hope to still be burning, he goes to where they’ve laid Lazarus. Four days Lazarus had been dead. This is significant because Jews at this time believed the soul finally left the body after three days. So having been dead for four days, the light of Lazarus was completely out. And if the length of time wasn’t enough, when Jesus tells them to roll away the stone to Lazarus’ tomb, they tell him, “Lord, already there is a stench.”

There's a word. It comes down like a hammer here, unyielding and real, made harder by the fact that we also know this smell. There's not a person here who hasn't experienced the smell of death and decay. Even if you haven't, we recognize the scent daily and in multiple ways: The news reeks of it. The way our bodies don't do what they used to, and the slow march of entropy that surrounds us - the odor comes in under the door. I see it too in the struggles of our local businesses to function with too few staff who can afford to live here. Our priorities and short-sightedness fill our lungs and we grow used to the smell, learn to live with it, despite our hopes for this town. The lack of vitality and generosity that have been sucked out of our common civic life in the wake of covid is a constant reminder and brings its own stench. Death is and has been in the air for so long we want to keep the stone where it is, keep that invading stranger at bay - spare ourselves.

The smell of grief in the wake of death even overwhelms Jesus, who is greatly "disturbed in spirit and deeply moved". Jesus was not immune to grief, to being swept up in the tide of tears and wails around and within him. Remember that Lazarus was "he whom you love." And keep in mind that this is chapter 11. The Last Supper starts two chapters later. His betrayal, arrest, trial, and death are in view - not only for us, but for him. In the death of his beloved friend, is he facing a growing awareness of the death waiting for him? One professor of mine even suggests that "this moment is Jesus' 'agony in the garden' - a moment found in the three other gospels but not in John.

With Jesus, though, hope remains, doesn't it? Hope of the resurrection. That's the hope that we've been hanging on to since Jesus' first words in this story: "This illness does not lead to death..." he says. Speaking to Martha when she ran out to meet him on his way, he names that hope outright - that "Your brother will rise again."

Martha knows about this "I know," she says, "that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." That faith is something, but the reality of death looms large over her life THIS DAY, too large for this idea to be more than a meager hope. It's to that meager hope that Jesus speaks, bringing into the present - "I am the resurrection and the life."

This is the very center of our story today, friends - Jesus' redirecting Martha's hope. Understandably, Death is almost all Martha can see: "She anticipates the promise of the resurrection as [only] a future life with God," a promise that may even help her bear the weight. But resurrection in John is always seen in light of the incarnation (Lewis 152). "Because of its radical commitment to the incarnation, to the Word made *flesh*," the resurrection is not only a distant future (Last Day) reality - it is an immediate here-and-now promise of not only life, but abundant life. The Divine becoming human "demands concern and importance of life here and now (157)," and resurrection is opened to include the here and now. To put it another way, "The assurances of life *after* death are available now in the present (Lewis 152)." This means that life IN THE FACE of death is possible, even if it seems impossible.

Jesus doesn't only declare "I am the resurrection" - he says "i am the resurrection AND THE LIFE." "When he says, 'and the life' ...abundant life because of Jesus is in view (153)." Hear his very next words: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

What does that living look like, though? Life in the face of death?

It's certainly one thing to say that when Jesus calls himself the resurrection and the life in John, he's not only talking about the afterlife. But, seeing him standing before that tomb, weeping and facing his own mortality, he calls out Lazarus. "Come out!" He calls Lazarus into that life.

And here's the rub: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." Can you imagine if Jesus stopped there? No, his next words point beyond this resurrection, they point even beyond life. They point to living: "Unbind him, and let him go."

We too are bound, my friends. Death has a way of tightening around us our sense of what living should consist of. But with those words, Jesus breathes into our dry bones, unbinding us from our burial clothes donned too soon, and he calls us to life. But this is not the end of the story.

The first scene of the very next chapter of John, Lazarus, Martha and Mary give a dinner for him. I see them passing dishes between them laughing, eyes wide and warm, “seeing” each other and listening intently. I see friends introducing late coming guests and the table wide with welcome. A sense of being sure that everyone is fed and has enough pervades the atmosphere.

Here too in this scene, death is present - seated at the table too. Perhaps another of the guests, warmly invited. For, at one point in the evening, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume that she’d saved for and went over to Jesus, and anointed his feet, wiping them with her hair. She sees what’s coming for him - that raising her brother to life will cost him his. But the familiar stench flees and “The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” Was it only the perfume that smelled so sweet?

AMEN