

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR A

Psalm 129 (130)



Shaindy Lefkowitz, *A Song of Ascent* © 2026, shaindysart

This psalm of lament is part of the group of psalms called ‘Songs of Ascents’ (Psalms 120–134), probably so-called because they were sung by pilgrims ‘going up’ to Jerusalem.

Ideally Jews were expected to travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the main religious festivals. St Luke relates one such visit to Jerusalem when the twelve-year-old Jesus stayed behind in the Temple talking with the Doctors of the Law (Luke 2: 41–50).

The characteristic of these psalms is the use of clear, simple imagery, which is why they are often among people’s favourites. Their main feature is a great confidence in the Lord’s protection and help. In today’s psalm, the exact nature of the sin is not specified, but the person praying acknowledges their total trust in the forgiving mercy of the Lord.

It is interesting that whereas the psalm begins with an individual confession of sin (‘Hear *my* voice, *my* pleading’), it moves to a collective lament (‘if you, O Lord should mark [our] iniquities’), and ends with the whole nation of Israel needing God’s pardon.

Gospel John 11: 1–45

The story of Lazarus’s resurrection is only found in John’s Gospel. This has led some scholars to question its historicity. There are, however, fairly similar stories in the other Gospels, such as the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5: 35-43). The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and last ‘sign’ (see the Prego Plus for the Fourth Sunday in Lent for comments).

Lazarus

This was a common name at the time, meaning ‘God helps’. There is another story in Luke’s Gospel concerning a Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31), though they are not generally thought to be the same person.

In this story Lazarus, is not only a historical figure, but he also represents all Christians.

Life and death

Throughout this story John gives two different meaning to these words. On the one hand it has the traditional sense of being biologically alive or dead. On the other it has a more symbolic meaning.

Life is to be with God, here on earth or in heaven.

Death is to be separated from God. In this way, he is able to say that those who believe in Jesus will never die (11: 26).

Four days

The length of time is significant. Jews believed that the soul of a dead person hovered in close proximity to the body for three days. There would be no chance of bringing someone back to life after four days. Dead bodies were left in a tomb carved out of the limestone rock with a stone covering the entrance for a whole year. After that time, the bones were placed into a box and put in an ossuary to await the final resurrection.

Martha and Mary

The two sisters’ different personalities first described in Luke’s Gospel (10: 38–42) are evident here in the way they greet Jesus: Martha, active and practical; Mary more intense and contemplative.

Martha’s belief in the final resurrection at the end of time is in line with that held by Pharisees in Jesus’s time. In a dialogue typical of John’s Gospel, Jesus uses her original misunderstanding to reveal a profound truth: He is the resurrection.

Jesus gives thanks to the Father

Although we are not told of Jesus’s prayer to the Father about his friend Lazarus, his public thanksgiving is a way of showing that he is not just a miracle worker, but that his power comes from God.