

Jesus Raises Lazarus - [a sign of things to come]

In this series of homilies I have usually started with a song, but this time I will introduce a song at the end. There is a lot of significance to this story and time will not allow us to speak to them all. In this long chapter, John 11:1-57, this is the last of the signs in the Gospel of John and another transitional story to introduce the final days of Jesus before he was crucified. Fr. Raymond Brown, a noted Roman Catholic Scholar on John's Gospel says, *"In John the reference to spiritual deliverance is primary, and the symbolic element is stronger. And, as we have said, this primary emphasis on the symbolic possibilities of the miracle differentiates John from the Synoptics."*

In 11: 21-44, perhaps we come to the real transitional point of this sign and what makes it the final episode that triggers the rest of the story in the Gospel of John. As we begin this part Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though one dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die. Do you believe this?"* In response to this question Martha answered, *"I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world."* The rest, as they say, is history!

There are some important things you should know about this story in order to fully understand why it is a significant transition to all of the chapters that follow from chapters 12 through 21. We have to begin with Lazarus. The name Lazarus is only mentioned in all of the Gospels twice, but only here as the brother of Martha and Mary. There was only one other time in Luke, chapter 16, that a Lazarus is mentioned. This Lazarus was a beggar with sores who was sitting at the gate asking for food of a very wealthy man. While we have heard of Mary and Martha several times in the Gospels, there was never a mention that they had a brother until this story in John. As scholars tell us, this strongly suggest that the author of John's Gospel created this symbolic person for his own literary purposes.

Next we point out that John tells this story as part of a great public event. Crowds were gathered of friends and neighbors so this was not a

miraculous event done in private. This story also emphasizes that Jesus postponed his journey to Bethany until the news came that Lazarus was actually dead. According to customs of that era, a person was definitively dead after four days and Jesus arrived even after he was entombed. Mary and Martha express their disappointment in Jesus noting that if he came earlier he might have been able to restore Lazarus. Then Jesus orders Lazarus to come forth from the tomb.

Bishop John Shelby Spong says, *“Jesus then orders the people to “unbind him and let him go.” If this were history, can you imagine that it would have been possible to suppress the account so deeply that no hint of it would have appeared in any Christian circle or writing until John decided to reveal it some three generations later? No, the raising of Lazarus is not an event that occurred in history”*, from “Reclaiming The Bible For A Non-Religious World”.

When Jesus finally agreed to return with his disciples to Judea, they reminded him, *"Rabbi, not long ago the Jews wanted to stone you to death. Do you really want to go back there?"* Jesus then finally tells them that *Lazarus has died, but I'm glad that I wasn't there so that you can grow in faith. Let's go to Lazarus."* Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, *"Let's go so that we, too, can die with Jesus."*

In this story, John highlights the emotional climate of all whom he met. *"When Jesus saw Mary crying, and the Jews who were crying with her, he was deeply moved and troubled. So Jesus asked, "Where did you put Lazarus?" They answered him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus cried. The Jews said, "See how much Jesus loved him." But some of the Jews asked, "Couldn't this man who gave a blind man sight keep Lazarus from dying?"*

Jesus reminds Martha and everyone there that they were about to see God's glory. After a brief prayer to his Father we are told that Jesus shouted as loudly as he could saying, *"Lazarus, come out!"* The drama continues as Lazarus comes out of the tomb wearing the grave clothes around him with a handkerchief over his face. Jesus then told them, *"Free Lazarus, and let him go."*

But the story John presents to us does not end here. Most people are very unfamiliar with verses 45 through 57, so they are not familiar with clarity of John's decisive conclusion about why he presents this unique story. Many Christians continue to ask why Jesus was crucified. Without reading the rest of this chapter the real point of why Jesus was brutally killed is misrepresented. So what is the conclusion that the Gospel of John wanted us to know? Allow me to now read John's words in verses 45 to 57 so you can hear it for yourselves.

45 Many Jews who had visited Mary and had seen what Jesus had done believed in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council. They asked, "What are we doing? This man is performing a lot of miracles. 48 If we let him continue what he's doing, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will take away our position and our nation."

49 One of them, Caiaphas, who was chief priest that year, told them, "You people don't know anything. 50 You haven't even considered this: It is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed."

51 Caiaphas didn't say this on his own. As chief priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation. 52 He prophesied that Jesus wouldn't die merely for this nation, but that Jesus would die to bring God's scattered children together and make them one.

53 From that day on, the Jewish council planned to kill Jesus. 54 So Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews. Instead, he left Bethany and went to the countryside near the desert, to a city called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

55 The Jewish Passover was near. Many people came from the countryside to Jerusalem to purify themselves before the Passover. 56 As they stood in the temple courtyard, they looked for Jesus and asked each other, "Do you

think that he'll avoid coming to the festival?" 57 (The chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that whoever knew where Jesus was should tell them so that they could arrest him.)

May I repeat verses 51 to 54 again for clarity? REPEAT.....

Why would Jesus be killed? As Caiaphas said, 52 He prophesied that Jesus wouldn't die merely for this nation, but that Jesus would die to bring God's scattered children together and make them one. Was Caiaphas speaking about an afterlife or was he, according to John's intent, explaining God's will for all people in this present life then and now?

John has made this clear when Jesus said in his prayer in John 17:21, "I pray that all of these people continue to have unity in the way that you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they may be united with us so that the world will believe that you have sent me." And in John in 17:23, "I am in them, and you are in me. So they are completely united. In this way the world knows that you have sent me and that you have loved them in the same way you have loved me."

In this 21st century we have an even greater understanding of the unity of our universe and oneness of the people living on earth. The story of Lazarus was a provocative way to gather an eclectic crowd to consider the mystery of death. John also has Caiaphas speaking about God wanting to bring people together and make them one. Jesus, in word and deed, spoke of the interdependence we must appreciate to live well together.

- Today even science is demonstrating that our humanity shares the same elements that unifies the entire universe,

Supportive Material: "Recognize that the very molecules that make up your body, the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the galaxy, enriching pristine gas clouds with the chemistry of life. So that we are all connected to each other biologically, to the earth chemically and to the rest of the universe atomically. That's kinda cool! That makes me smile and I actually feel quite large at the end of that. It's not that we are better than the universe, we are part of the universe. We are in the universe and the universe is in us."

— Neil deGrasse Tyson [head of the <http://www.haydenplanetarium.org/tyson/>]

-- NOVA - "The Star in You" - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/space/star-in-you.html>

"Our planet, our society, and we ourselves are built of star stuff."—Carl Sagan, Cosmos

- We understand from the Creation (the Big Bang Theory) that, "matter and energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only converted or transformed"

Supportive Material: "Matter can be converted into energy and energy can be converted into matter, but neither matter nor energy can be created or destroyed"

"Theory of Relativity - Factual Implications" <http://www.allaboutscience.org/theory-of-relativity.htm>

- All humanity is ONE - we share a common DNA and come from a common ancestor - Race was a divisive theory to create the idea of the supremacy of some and forming class distinctions among humanity.

Supportive Material: "Race - are we so different?" <http://www.understandingrace.org/home.html>

"Faces of America" with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/facesofamerica/>

- The author of Colossians, speaking of the living word and verb of God, tells us in 1:16-17, "He created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Whether they are kings or lords, rulers or powers— everything has been created through him and for him. He existed before everything and holds everything together."

Science now speaks of the "God Factor" - the Higgs Boson. The particle that science believes holds all things together in this universe.

Supportive Material: What is the Higgs boson and why does it matter? - <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21277-what-is-the-higgs-boson-and-why-does-it-matter.html>

- The authors of scripture were inspired to share with us some of these matters of creation and God presence even though they still mystify us. While words change their meaning over the centuries we still cannot find adequate words to clarify these metaphors and allegories of the universe. The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "Now we see a blurred image in a mirror. Then we will see very clearly. Now my knowledge is incomplete. Then I will have complete knowledge as God has complete knowledge of me." As time passes these early words of wisdom keep improving as we move through the centuries. As he closes chapter 13, when our childish understanding grows to a mature one, "these three things remain: faith, hope, and love." On these we continue to concentrate for a well balanced mature relationship with others.

- FAITH - Finding Authenticity In Today's Happenings
- HOPE - Habitually Open to Progressive Exploration
- LOVE - Limitless Offerings Veraciously Expended

We realize that life with God is a relationship and a way life as we grow into new understanding of our universe. It is not dogma and doctrine established years ago, but an awareness of the Spirit of God that the prophet Jeremiah spoke about in chapter 31:33-34, "But this is the promise that I will make to Israel after those days," declares the Lord: "I will put my teachings inside them, and I will write those teachings on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will each person teach his neighbors or his relatives by saying, 'Know the Lord.' All of them, from the least important to the most important, will know me," declares the Lord, "because I will forgive their wickedness and I will no longer hold their sins against them."

Understanding the way things are today, hoping for new revelations as we learn to experience the limitless offerings of grace and truth as we mature. With incomplete knowledge we put away literalism and speak with a certainty of growing in a personal awareness of that Divine Presence in us all. It is how we can sing the poems - metaphors and allegories of our hymns like that of "I Am The Bread Of Life" in our 1982 Hymnal, page 335.

Singing especially verse 1 & 4.....

1. I am the Bread of life,
 They who come to Me shall not hunger,
 They who believe in Me shall not thirst.
 No one can come to Me
 Unless the Father draw them.

REFRAIN (repeated after each verse)
 And I will raise him up,
 And I will raise him up,
 And I will raise him up on the last day.

2. The bread that I will give
 Is My flesh for the life of the world,

And they who eats of this bread,
They shall live for ever,
They shall live for ever.

3. Unless you eat
Of the flesh of the Son of Man
And drink of His blood,
You shall not have life within you.
You shall not have life within you.

4. I am the Resurrection,
I am the Life,
They who believe in Me
Even if they die,
They shall live for ever.

5. Yes, Lord, we believe
That You are the Christ,
The Son of God
Who has come
Into the world.