

A sign of God's presence.

John 11:1-45

Peace & First

Another very long passage today from the Gospel of John. And as usual in the stories in John, there is lots going on. It is also one that is often used at funerals so at least some parts of the passage are very well known.

In the first part of the story there is heartache. Not just the heartache of Lazarus' death. After all he is a brother and the three siblings seemed to get along so I'm guessing the empty spot at the table will be tough for a while. There is also heartache because of Jesus' delay. Whatever his motives (v.4-5), Jesus' delay intensifies the pain of Martha and Mary, both of whom begin their interactions with him by sharing their distress and perhaps even accusation using the exact same words: "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v.21, 32). This is pain, disappointment, and hurt, and it is something that every single one of us has experienced at some time in our lives.

The next part of this story is miracle. It comes as a promise at first but it isn't until later that the magnitude of it takes hold. When Jesus initially declares that Lazarus will be raised, Martha assumes he is speaking about the promised resurrection of all at the end of time and she gives her affirmation in words that sound like they come out of a first-century creed: "Yes, Lord, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day." As a side note- there were two camps of Jewish belief-those who believed in life after death and those who did not. All Jewish belief is not the same, just like all Christian and Muslim is not the same. Ok, back on track. Jesus though is putting out there that the life he offers is not just something way down the road at the end of time or one's life, but what he offers makes a difference in the here and now. And that promise provokes from

Martha the confession that Jesus is Messiah, which comes only from Peter in the other gospels.

The miracle promised earlier in the story happens when Jesus comes to Lazarus' tomb. If one takes a moment to look at the whole story it can be noted that he is not necessarily a welcome presence. Not only did both sisters confront him with their disappointment, but the crowd is also miffed. The people gathered also share their belief that if Jesus had cared more he would have come sooner and thereby averted this tragedy. In their mind, Jesus was not being a very good bff. Yet in the very midst of this disappointment and doubt, Jesus surprises them all, first with his command to remove the stone to Lazarus' tomb and, second, with his call for Lazarus to come out. And Lazarus does. This is what we call a miracle, but in John's Gospel is called a sign – something that reveals the character and commitment of God to God's children.

Interestingly, that miracle/sign provokes different reactions. At first we may think it odd that not everyone is happy or thankful for this miracle and the good fortune that Lazarus has his life back. Yet, last week we also found out not everybody was glad for a man who could see for the first time ever! So while many of those present come to believe in Jesus not everybody does. And this time those that are afraid get so fearful they begin to plan his death.

It is interesting that something that would seem as clear-cut as raising someone from the dead causes division. Maybe it is always so, that some are comforted and spurred to faith by Jesus' miracles or blessings and others are threatened and hardened in their opposition. God's activity will change us, for some it is comforting and for others it is threatening.

It is tempting to stop here because there is so much to consider. But, the story continues and Jesus makes another move: an invitation. While the action to raise Lazarus from the dead is clearly and decisively Jesus', yet he invites those around him to participate: "Unbind him and let him go" (v.44). We don't usually do anything but give this a cursory nod, but let's consider it just a little more. Jesus did not have to issue that command. He could have gone over to Lazarus himself, unwrapped him, then given him a heartfelt and congratulatory hug. After all they were close friends so a huge welcome back is in order! But rather than linger in the limelight of his miracle, Jesus invites those around to get involved, to play a part in seeing this miracle move forward. I think the same is true with us. We are not only called to be witnesses of God's action in our lives, but also to be changed by what we see and thereby invited into the ongoing world of what God is doing. God does the miracle, but God also gives us a part to play as it unfolds in our life. God's work, our hands.

I think this story has much to offer us as we go through life. It reminds us that there is the promise for life and God's presence in the midst of heartache. I think it is important to remember that Jesus wept, there was heartache. Jesus wept and he knew that there was good to come and life everlasting. That does not change the reality of sadness and sorrow in our lives. It is part of it. It reminds us that God's presence in our life and world, while comforting to some is threatening to others. And maybe, just maybe, we can be the ones to participate in the blessings, the signs, the miracles, to move forward. Maybe we can be the ones to recognize God's work, comfort and challenge those who are anxious about the change that is afoot by reminding them that God's work in our lives never leaves us unchanged and that God will accompany us into the unknown

future. God not only does miracles, but invites us to participate in them, in this way extending their impact and drawing others into the new reality they create. God's work, our hands.