

One Way Through It  
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March 26, 2023 – Lent 5A  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

The season of Lent has always been about preparation. In the early Church, it was the prime season for new converts to prepare to receive the sacrament of Baptism. Later, this preparation began to include things like fasting, self-examination, and the occasional confession of sins as ways of clearing out the obstacles to experiencing fully the arc of Holy Week and Easter. This fifth Sunday in Lent works as a sort of hinge. It's where the turn toward the darkness of Holy Week really begins, and we start to get a sense for what is about to happen. This set of readings really speaks to that turn. Ezekiel gives us the enormous pile of dry bones of the whole house of Israel which the prophet himself doubts that even God can breathe life back into. Psalm 130 gives us the plaintive cry for God to hear what an old translation renders as "the voice of my complaint". Lastly, John foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection by having Jesus raise his friend Lazarus after he'd been dead and buried for four days.

Gloom and doom are not necessarily what we want to think about, necessarily, when it comes to preparing for the bright burst of color that is Easter. However, one cannot get to the brightness of the resurrection without going through the darkness of death first. There's just no way around it. It's in the darkness of death, which today includes the entirety of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, we also learn just how human Jesus really is.

Emotion is the motivator of all of the principal characters in this story. The disciples and bystanders, are, predictably, collectively dazed and confused. Martha and Mary, and to some extent Jesus himself, are driven primarily by grief over Lazarus'

death. Martha and Mary are also really angry about Jesus' apparent failure to show up in time to stop it from happening altogether. They both make their displeasure with him crystal clear: "If you had been here, he would not have died!" Martha is much more hopeful when she meets Jesus; she alone confesses that he is the Son of God, through faith in whom eternal life is possible, which starts to set us readers up for the possibility that we're about to witness Jesus performing another miracle or sign. For her part, Mary can't quite get there, and it is her anger and grief which in turn affect Jesus deeply.

The phrase John uses in Greek to describe what Jesus feels in this moment implies he's been shaken to his very core. The first part of it, *embrimasthai to pneumati* – "he was very troubled in spirit" - is also used elsewhere in the gospels to describe how Jesus feels about people who are suffering from some sort of affliction. The second, *tarassein heauton*, literally means "he troubled himself."<sup>1</sup> That John goes to such lengths to point out how upset Jesus is remarkable, especially given how ethereal and all-knowing Jesus seems to be otherwise. It's a rare glimpse of his humanity, and one that's tough for us, hearing this text centuries later, not to find some empathy with him in this moment. Despite his ability to know exactly what's happened before anyone else has figured it out, he is not exempt from experiencing pain. Question is, how has this cold dose of reality really affected him? Is his grief ultimately what moves him to act?

Maybe. Maybe not. He tells the disciples bluntly that Lazarus is dead before they leave for Bethany, and in doing so makes it clear that it is "for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (John 11:4b, NRSV). Of course, being outside of a situation like this is much different from being on the inside, especially when it comes

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<sup>1</sup> *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John I-XII*. Raymond E. Brown, translator and commentator (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 425-6.

to how emotion affects human responses to it. It's not until Jesus arrives in Bethany and is confronted by a grieving Martha and Mary that he seems to truly understand the gravity of the situation. And it, along with a healthy dose of empathy, are what seem ultimately to convince him of what he will have to do in order to transform this moment from one of sadness into one which glorifies God.

That we read this passage on a Sunday which functions as a transition is no accident. "The raising of Lazarus is a pivot point in John's narrative, moving the reader (or original hearer) from the first section of John, often called the Book of Signs, to the second section, the Book of Glory. The pivot happens in two ways. First, the miracle at the tomb is Jesus' last and seventh sign in a series that began with the water to wine sign in chapter two. Second, the talk of 'glory' begins to amp up here. The first ten chapters of John contain a handful of references to God's glory (1:14, 2:11, and 8:54). Chapter eleven begins with a significant reference to glory—"This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4)—and John later provides a bookend with Jesus' question to Martha, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?' After the raising of Lazarus, John focuses his language much more concertedly on Jesus' glorification and God's glory, a central theme for the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

That theme of God's glory comes to its peak with Jesus' own resurrection. Both it, and the raising of Lazarus, remind us there's a huge cost involved in making that glory known. The raising of Lazarus is what ultimately convinces the authorities to

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, "Commentary on John 11:1-45. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-111-45-7> [accessed March 20, 2023].

pursue an arrest warrant for Jesus. His death, in turn, cost God the life of God's Son, not to mention the trauma it inflicted on his friends as they watched it happen. Both are unavoidable, and both take their emotional toll on those who live through them. The actor William Shatner, a.k.a. Star Trek's Captain Kirk, experienced something similar when he took a brief trip to space courtesy of Blue Origin in 2021. Reflecting on it afterward, he wrote, "when I looked... into space, there was no mystery, no majestic awe to behold . . . all I saw was death... It was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. The contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness... My trip to space was supposed to be a celebration; instead, it felt like a funeral."<sup>3</sup>

Shatner's wondering, and the death of Lazarus, both point toward the larger mysteries of God's creative power in the universe. They're more about the truth that there is something much bigger out there that goes beyond the realm of human knowing than they are anything else. "The witness of Scripture as a whole points toward something more, which begins with the truth that while God always shows up in the midst of human crisis and suffering, there can be no resurrection without some sort of death happening first. But the 'something more' in the appointed texts for this week is not about me or the particularities of my afterlife. [It] is the power of God to move the world in the direction of life: toward hope and restoration, toward a world infused with

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<sup>3</sup> William Shatner, "My Trip to Space Filled Me with Overwhelming Sadness." <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/william-shatner-space-boldly-go-excerpt-1235395113/> [accessed March 21, 2023].

the breath of God. If we pay attention, then with God's help we will see and know—in Scripture and in the life that teems around us—the glory of God."<sup>4</sup>

And that, from the distinct perspective of the Gospel of John, IS the point: we have seen, and we will see God's glory, if we but believe enough to look for it.

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<sup>4</sup> Cameron B.R. Howard, "God and the Infinite Void." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/god-and-the-infinite-void> [accessed March 20, 2023].