

DEATH, LIFE, FAITH

based on Hebrews 9:23-38 and 11:1-3, and John 11:1-45

What do we make of these words: “This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God’s glory!”? Do we find them unsettling, maybe making us squirm a little in our seats? Or do they make us want to shout a premature (we are in Lent after all) “Alleluia!”? Would any of us be brave enough to say these words to one another, let alone to someone who has a loved one who is seriously ill or even to that ill person directly? Our reaction, our possible willingness or unwillingness to say something like this to another, probably comes down to our understanding of life, death and faith itself. It comes down to whether or not we truly believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life!

Over this season of Lent, as we have worked through the letter to the Hebrews, we have been exploring some of the key doctrines of Christianity that we can easily exclaim but sometimes do not fully grasp, and maybe, in all honesty, will never fully grasp. They are the theologies that can hold us back when we are in situations that call us to share our faith. They can be the theologies that make us feel less Christian by other Christians because we do not quite see them from the same perspective. And although, year after year, we make the journey to the foot of the cross and are jubilant when we discover that the tomb is still empty, they are the theologies which make us reluctant to put into our own words what we have found and therefore what it is that we believe! Although, it has to be said, some of this hesitancy is not so much about theology or our understanding of it; it is more about whether or not we fully accept that the illness that we all have, will not lead to death, but to the glory of God!

On the Sunday before we hit the road into Jerusalem and the final week of Jesus’s fully earthly life, the story of Lazarus from the gospel of John is climatic. It definitively points us to what God set out to achieve through taking on human form and living amongst us. It demonstrates the authority that Jesus has and the victory he ultimately claimed over death. And we see the final thing that should leave us in no doubt who Jesus is. Yet, like all the stories from the gospel of John we have explored this Lent, what we should see is not exactly what seems to have been seen. There is both belief and disbelief, understanding and misunderstanding.

From the words that both Mary and Martha greet Jesus with, there clearly was a belief among Jesus’s friends and followers that he had the ability to heal. If Jesus had gone to Bethany when he first got the news that Lazarus was ill, they believed that Lazarus’s illness would not have led to his death. There was also, from Martha’s exchange with Jesus, a sense among Jesus’s friends and followers that Jesus was more than a miracle worker and teacher. Yet, although Martha professed Jesus to be “the Messiah” and “the Son of God,” her questioning of him regarding the opening of the tomb demonstrates that they did not fully understand or maybe not entirely believe. To some extent, we should not be surprised by this. To make sense of who Jesus is, we need to look back on the different events and Jesus’s words as recorded in the gospels through the lens of Easter. It is what happened on the cross and then three days later that gives the clarity. Now, given that the gospels were all written after the event, we might wonder why the gospel writers included the ambiguity and uncertainty we meet time again. What we learn from the letter to the Hebrews and the other epistles in our Bibles, though, is

that our faith is not meant to be blind. Yes, we have to have hope and have conviction in things that cannot be seen. But God does not expect us to reach that point without seeing. The gospel of John almost ends with this very point: everything that the gospel writer described was for the purpose that people could see and come to believe. And as humans, we do need to see the uncertainty and the ambiguity, if what we believe is to be firmly rooted.

The gospel writer of John might not have written the gospel entirely through the lens of Easter, but Jesus's own death did frame the story of Lazarus. There are hints to what was to come and there are indications within the text that the Johannine Community knew about some of what they were being told. For example, the description of Mary being the one who anointed Jesus. This story comes in the next chapter, chapter 12! Therefore, although there is much in this story that reflects on Jesus's humanity and the tension between Jesus's divinity and humanity in himself as well as his actions—which is helpful in understanding our relationship with God—at this moment in Lent, that is not what we need focus on. We are preparing ourselves to stand again at the foot of the cross, so we need to reflect on what Jesus says from the perspective of our own sin and salvation.

Here in the story of Lazarus, we have Jesus proclaiming that he is the resurrection and life. Jesus expanded that claim by saying, “those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” These are the words which affirm for us an eternal life, although that is not an eternal physical life. Death of our mortal bodies will still happen whether we believe or not! However, this is not just a future event. The theology in the gospel of John is about something present as well as something future. And so, we need to go back to what looks to be almost a throw away statement as it is not reacted to by anyone. “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!”

One way to describe sin is as an illness of our souls that is always there. We can strive to resist its temptations but, in this life at least, we are never fully healed because whatever we do it maintains a hold on us. Given all we say about the cross, saying this feels contradictory, as our witness is that the Lamb of God, the Son of God came to take away the sins of the world. Yet, from reading the letters to the early church, although Jesus's death changes humanity's relationship with God, the reality was not that the world all of a sudden became perfect. If that was what happened, we probably would not be sitting here! However, in Jesus bearing our sin, instead of the darkness, despair and the nothingness that is associated with death, we are given the hope of life. Simply, sin no longer has to mean death. But do we believe that?

The letter writer to the Hebrews lays it out for us: in Jesus's sacrifice sin is removed, but although he only dies once to deal with sin, he has to come again to save us! When Lazarus came out of the tomb, he had to be liberated from the grave clothes. That physical sign of death held Lazarus back from life and similarly this is what sin does to us, unless we let Jesus completely unbind us.

As we come to the table, do we come with a sense that in sharing its gifts God's glory is proclaimed? Or do we come seeking to be unbound from what is holding us back? How ever we come, we need to let our faith be renewed so that the affliction of sin, which we all have, does not mean death. Because of Jesus and all that he came to do so that all might know the love and mercy of God, we have life and we should proclaim it. Amen

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