Lazarus, Come Out!

John 11:1-53

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Introduction

Our series on the Gospel of John ends with one of the most magnificent and memorable stories in the whole Bible.

One commentator says that this story is really “the Fourth Gospel in miniature.”

“John narrates here a stupendous miracle – the raising of a man who had been dead for four days. Moreover, he says that this was done in circumstances that necessarily involved publicity, and that in Bethany, a little village no more than a couple miles from Jerusalem. The miracle was witnessed by some of ‘the Jews,’ who told the Pharisees what had been done. It was on account of this that the chief priests and Pharisees consulted about how Jesus could be destroyed. Thus was instituted the chain of events that was to lead to his death.”

It’s a long passage. We can’t talk about every dimension of it. But one last time, let’s enter the narrative of the Gospel of John and meet John’s extraordinary hero, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Your Friend is Sick

At the end of chapter 10, Jesus has withdrawn to the wilderness near the Jordan where John had been baptizing. This was because he had once again been about to be stoned to death by his enemies in the Temple. By this point in the Gospel it is totally clear that the next trip Jesus makes to Jerusalem will be his last one.

But Jesus has a friend. His name is Lazarus. Actually Jesus has three dear friends: Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, sisters and a brother. And this friend is very sick. So the sisters send for Jesus, because they know what he can do.

***“Lord, he whom you love is ill.” -Jn 11:3***

It’s a request. They want Jesus to come. They want Jesus to heal their brother.

But he chooses not to go. Why he doesn’t go is debated by commentators. The most straightforward reading is that he takes this as an opportunity to offer a decisive sign as to who he really is:

***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***

It can almost seem like a kind of hardhearted for Jesus to just dawdle where he is when he has a dear friend on the brink of death.

On the other hand, in the Gospel of John, and really all the Gospels, Jesus sets his own agenda. He is not talked or pressured into following other people’s timetable or agenda. Perhaps that’s all there is to it. Not a bad reminder for the people-pleaser in most of us.

Maybe he waited because he knew that if he got anywhere near Jerusalem he was likely to face death. Maybe he needed some time to pray and discern whether the hour had come, whether after several near misses now was the time when he would meet his destiny at the Cross.

I think that is actually the meaning of what he finally says to his disciples. John has Jesus talking an awful lot about his glory. His signs reveal his glory. In this case his sign will indeed reveal his glory. But there’s a double meaning: Jesus’ advance references to the Cross in John often have him speaking of the Cross being the occasion of his true glory – not his humiliation but his exaltation. Not his defeat but his triumph.

So: two men will die and two men will be raised near Jerusalem in days to come: first Lazarus, then Jesus – both events leading to the glorification of Christ.

Off to Bethany

Finally he is ready. Let us go to Judea again. They will kill you there! He offers a cryptic answer:

***Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.***

Which probably means: Night is coming. But for now it is still day, and I have a friend to bring back from the dead.

And then Thomas, unexpectedly: ***Let us also go, that we may die with him***. We all go, we all die.

They arrive near Bethany. Lazarus is good and dead. Four days. Decomposition and no hope. Very public scene. Large crowd of mourners.

Such a tender exchange between Martha and Jesus:

***Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.***

Is this an accusation? No—a statement of faith.

Jesus: ***Your brother will rise again.***

Martha: Sure, I know my doctrine – at the last day, in the resurrection, he will rise.

J: No, that’s not quite it. We are beyond doctrine here.

***I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.***

Words so comforting to all of us who have ever heard them or recited them on those dark days.

Words that mean the last days begin now, resurrection begins now, because the one who creates life and is life and raises to life is here talking to you.

Martha seems to almost get it.

***Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.***

Mary

It is time for us to meet Mary. Mary intrigues. In John only she is identified with the woman who scandalously anointed Jesus with her hair. A different kind of woman from her sister – perhaps a different kind of closeness with Jesus.

She doesn’t go meet him at first…Angry? Broken-hearted?

But now at Jesus’ request she comes running to meet him. She has an audience trailing her. Their private moment will be brief.

She falls at his feet weeping over her brother and wailing out her plaintive faith. She’s crying. The arriving mourners are crying.

Mary says: ***Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.***

The next line is fascinating: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. The words here are very powerful -- hard to translate. Angry? Snorting? Groaning?

What is he feeling?

A full registering of his own grief over Lazarus?

Empathy with Mary and the other mourners?

Anger at death, the great enemy of human life?

Sorrow at the sorrowful state of the human condition?

Nobody could feel this like Jesus -- but haven’t we all gotten our own taste? Have you ever just reached the point where you had reached your breaking point with human suffering?

Example from my Holocaust research. Three years full time reading about it, you would think nothing could surprise me.

Mother, why did you make me wear my Shabbat dress, we are going to be shot… This just sent me over the edge, past my endurance, past my built up resistance!

These groans of Jesus over and with human suffering, grief, and death speak very powerfully.

Lazarus Come Out!

Jesus moves decisively into action: where have you laid him?

***Jesus wept. -11:35***

The shortest verse in the Bible and in some ways the most important.

Jesus wept. Not an impassive God beyond human emotion, not an unmoved mover, but a God who weeps over us and weeps with us.

And so he says:

Take away the stone!

But Lord, the smell?!

Did I not tell you? Take away the stone!

***Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out, his hands and his feet bound with strips of cloth, and has face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, Unbind him and let him go.***

Set him free, clean him up, take him home. No more weeping, at least not for now.

You Raise Him -- We Kill You

This very public act has consequences as Jesus knew it would. Same as with everything else he did: belief, and disbelief; commitment, and repulsion; dedication of life; dedication to his death.

The next section is very important both historically and theologically.

At least some eyewitnesses go to their leaders and ask for a visit. Uh, well, that guy Jesus just raised a man who had been dead four days.

The leaders call a deacons meeting. Well not really.

What they call is a meeting of the Sanhedrin. This is a trial without benefit of a defense.

Worriers: This dude is amazing and people are believing in him. If this keeps on the Romans will sniff rebellion and destroy our temple and nation. Won’t do us any good either.

Caiaphas, cold blooded high priest, so very scornful here, which matches his historical reputation.

***You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.***

Jesus must die.

Not because he’s done wrong but because this is now bigger than him. The argument from expedience. Many have died in our world on this basis.

Take the Dreyfus Case. Late 19th century scandal that rocked France. Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish military officer, the first in the French General Staff. He was hated by anti-Semites, who identified the nation and especially the Army with the Church. No Jew should rise so far. He was charged falsely with treason, sharing secrets with the enemy. Clear evidence of his innocence surfaces. But the Army doubles down. Why? The grand tradition of the French Army, of France itself, is now at stake. Sure, Dreyfus himself may be innocent but this is bigger than one guy now. Too bad for him but that’s how it goes sometimes. In the end, Dreyfus was finally exonerated, but it took a struggle lasting more than ten years.

Here Caiaphas is reasoning similarly. This man must die for the good of the people. John next offers perhaps the only example of a gospel writer explicitly theologizing about the meaning of Jesus’ death. He takes the judgment of Caiaphas and makes theological sense of it.

He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

Jesus would indeed die, one man for all, both for the Jewish nation and for believing gentiles. That is, from Caiaphas’ perspective Jesus would die to solve a political problem, whereas from God’s perspective, Jesus would die to save the world.

One Final Withdrawal

Jesus once again withdraws into the wilderness in the face of death threats and informants looking for him to arrest him. We learn a bit later that they want Lazarus too; after all, any guy who Jesus raised from the dead is also a threat. In a few days the climax comes. Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. By Friday he is hanging on the Cross.

Conclusion

Advent is coming. Kristen, our musicians, Matt, and I will each offer our interpretations of its meaning.

As we enter that festive season, try not to forget these encounters with Jesus in John. There’s no angels, shepherds, cattle, wise men, baby in the manger who somehow never cries. There’s the Word made flesh, coming into the world, full of grace and truth, full of power and majesty, fully aware that he would die at the hands of the world he had made.