

Gospel - John 11: 32-44

Pentecost 24

Sermon 11.7.21

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In the New Testament book of Hebrews the writer seems to indicate that all the saints in heaven are cheering us on to persevere and win the race of life God sets before us; but in times like these of sustained pandemic, I sometimes consider if I'd rather just give in a little and have a rest.

Our story today begins with Lazarus in his tomb. Earlier in the week, as he lay sick and dying, his two sisters, Martha and Mary, send a desperate plea to Jesus to come quickly to heal their brother. Instead, he chooses delay. He waits a full two days before beginning his trip from Bethabara to Bethany, itself an entire day's journey. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus is four days gone. "**Lazarus is dead**," Jesus had foretold his disciples.

So Lazarus is stuck in the grave, and Jesus could have stopped it.

He privately explains "it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." In view of the finality of Lazarus' condition along with all the attendant grief and trauma, that explanation doesn't necessarily feel adequate or comforting. It seems to fall short.

They are questions we all grapple with. Why doesn't God stop bad things from happening? Why does God delay? Why doesn't God just hurry up and do something? Is God really glorified by all the stuff I have to go through or put up with? Is this "race" I am running really worth it?

Here's another question I bring to today's reading. Jesus commands him to come out; but now that he has settled into being dead for four days, does Lazarus truly want to come out?

There's a story in the Old Testament (in I Samuel 28) where King Saul is desperate to save his life and his kingdom. So he consorts with the witch of Endor to summon the spirit of dead prophet Samuel for help. When Samuel appears, he chides the king for disturbing his peace.

In today's Gospel Jesus shouts this miraculous word of command, and I wonder if Lazarus' peace is disturbed. I wonder too about the physical and emotional effort and energy required for him to return to human mortality. Wouldn't he rather to have just been left alone?

Please do notice with me that when Jesus arrives on the scene everyone is stuck.

Lazarus is stuck in his grave, certainly.

Mary is stuck in her words of, "Lord, if you'd gotten here on time, my brother would not have died." You could have prevented this, and you didn't.

Jewish critics are stuck on the same notion as they ask themselves, "Couldn't he have kept this man from dying?" Why didn't he?

Martha is stuck in her own idea about Jesus' limitation. "Lord, there is too much stench," too much repulsion here. This is beyond what you can deal with; you can't make this better.

The description of Jesus' emotion at this point is unsettling.

Our reading says he "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." The NIV reads that "he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."

But the German rendering and original Greek have Jesus being enraged and upset and making noises of anger and indignation.

He is misinterpreted by the attending Jews as crying tears of sorrow: "See how he loved him," they say.

Rather, Jesus weeps tears of fury. He is visibly agitated and angry, maybe because Lazarus' illness and death have made them all paralyzed and stuck in their stuff and fixed in unbelief.

When God gets mad, when Jesus gets mad, it's never about judging. It's always about renewal and transforming. He does not change our circumstances of death and trouble. No, Jesus calls us, he commands us to come out into new life in the midst of death and trouble.

Even Lazarus didn't come back to face a happy, placid and care-free life. Almost immediately the same Jews in this story begin to conspire how to do away with him all over again.

In today's Gospel Jesus makes these two very specific commands. The first is to Lazarus. Jesus charges him to come out.

The second he makes to the family members and guests. He tells them to "Unbind him" from his burial cloths, "and let him go." This second order requires a whole community action of sensitivity, delicate care and attention to detail. These bindings would have hardened onto Lazarus something like a plaster cast and would have been difficult to remove.

It reminds me of another Old Testament story involving the Prophet Jeremiah.

In the book of Jeremiah, chapter 38, King Zedekiah has been manipulated and influenced by a cadre of evil commanders to throw the prophet to the bottom of a great cistern. His body sinks down deep into the mud, which nearly covers him and holds him fast. There he is left to die from the elements and from starvation.

But then one faithful steward to the king, a foreigner, convinces him to retract the confinement order and set him free.

In Jeremiah's case he wasn't dead and called back to life, but he was as good as dead. Like Lazarus stuck in his grave, Jeremiah was stuck fast in his mud. And just as Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out, so the king commanded his servant to rescue the prophet from certain doom.

He said to him, "Take thirty men with you, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies."

In other words it takes one heavy rope and the herculean effort of a united community in order to raise him back to freedom.

Sometimes it requires a strong, even angry, in-your-face word of command to get us to put off settled grave-like conditions and get us to respond.

But the command of Christ is compelling beyond all resistance. He says, "Lazarus, Come out!" and Lazarus comes out without so much as a say-so. Lazarus succumbs to irresistible grace.

Then again, sometimes it takes an entire community to help us get out of a deeply mired state of being stuck in our stuff.

Community rescue is an especially effective antidote for deadly wounds of hurtful, disabling words.

When someone criticizes or blames us, we can let ourselves feel mired, injured, even slain. It then takes a strong rope of encouragement and the combined effort of a whole community of encouragers to reverse our condition, heal our wounds and restore us to a healthy and free state of mind.

According to John Gottman, who's studied the effects of negativity upon couples, the suggested ratio is five to one, so that for every negative encounter, there should be a minimum of five positive ones to counterbalance the original effects.

It's all the better if there should be as many as thirty words of encouragement for every single negative discouragement.

It takes a command of Jesus to startle us and bring us back to our senses; it takes a church full of encouragers to help us to unravel from negative vestiges or grave clothes.

The Lazarus story is a metaphor for what it truly means to be able to be delivered from some of our self-defeating deprecations and unbecoming patterns.

Death, it turns out, is comfortable. We can like getting stuck in our stuff, and negative self-talk can have us feeling right at home. Trying to come out can feel totally exhausting. Why must we struggle to change when we can feel good about settling in and accepting our deficiencies under the guise of "that's just the way I am"?

I probably have some successes I can claim in my role as Rector. However, from the beginning I have been made aware of some glaring personal inadequacies. For example:

- I have been seen as rude or
- disinterested in people or
- dismissive of St. David's and its culture;
- sometimes I've been seen as not Episcopal enough
- or not liturgically correct,
- unable to connect with St. David's members;
- therefore, I may not be able to be trusted to provide adequate pastoral care and counsel to some of our congregants.

Do I want to get rid of this stuff and shed perceptions and patterns like so many grave clothes and put them behind me? Honestly, no and yes.

No, because on one hand it takes some serious effort and hard work to abandon a tomb or a cistern of complacency and comfort where I can feel settled and safe. Why do that? I don't think I have the energy sometimes.

On the other hand for your sake and for love's sake the prospect of change feels compelling, hopeful and worthwhile.

I own my various weaknesses, and I do ask for your prayers and patience as I continue to work on these; as I continue to persevere to come out of the grave and run the set race.

Two things will help jolt me out of my tomb and cistern. And I believe they will help you, too.

The one, as I have already said, is the compelling command of Christ; in other words irresistible grace.

I don't know about you, but I cannot seem to get away from the Voice that keeps on commanding me to leave my grave behind. "Duane, Come out!"

I really like the fact that Jesus gets mad on my behalf. He hates and rages and weeps to see me stuck in my stuff, and he's not willing to have it. Thank God for that. If you have ever had a truly caring parent or teacher who said, "I am not going to put up with any more of your nonsense!" then you know what I am talking about.

The other thing that is truly of help, as again I have already said, is the unified encouragement of an entire community. I have a number people in my life, including many of you, especially including my life partner, Lynn, not willing to tolerate my forms of self-limitation.

Mixing the metaphors, you all are not only willing to help raise me up from a cistern of self-defeat, you are committed to stay involved and carefully help unwrap the layers of self-protective strategies in which I am bound. This you do with encouragement and support. You have been my cheerleaders. And I'm grateful.

As a Vestry we recently made a pact to only be using words of encouragement *to* one another and *about* one another.

I invite you all to consider the same covenant. It goes something like this:

We promise not to talk bad about anyone behind their back.

We promise not to listen to anyone talk bad about someone else behind their back.

We commit to speak directly and honestly with each other and especially with anyone for whom we have a concern.

We promise to be encouragers of each other, face-to-face, and we promise also to say only positive things about each other to non-vested third parties.

We promise not to criticize, judge or censure but make it a goal to really try to help each other with love, support and encourage-ment to become better.

As I said at the beginning, the saints in heaven are cheering us on to persevere and win the race of life circumstances set in front of us.

We who are God's saints here on earth cannot do anything more toward one another, and may we not, dear Lord, do any less. Amen.