

John 11: 1-45 Love At Work

You may recall, a while ago I spoke of “Thin Places” in the tradition of Celtic Spirituality. Although the definition would vary depending on whom you ask, thin places are the places where the veil between this world and the eternal world, the heavenly realm, feels especially thin that it’s almost permeable.

Exactly one year ago this Sunday was my Candidating Sunday, when you heard me preach as a candidate to become the pastor of this church, and my sermon (okay, I don’t expect you to remember) was titled Axis Mundi. Axis Mundi is the sacred place where heaven and earth meet (and my sermon suggested Jemez Springs was such a place.) Thin Places, Axis Mundi, experienced by people in many cultures, assume the presence of eternal, heavenly realm concurrent with, that is, existing at the same time, as this world we live in. We sometimes call it the Ultimate Reality. Not that this world is less real, nor that we start living the Eternal Life only when our earthly lives end, but both realities, temporal and eternal, existing at the same time.

In a sense, Jesus is a walking “Thin Place,” and a walking “Axis Mundi,” Because everywhere Jesus went, people got the glimpse of the heavenly realm; everything Jesus did and said, revealed the heavenly realm --- because he came from there. In him, the Eternal Life, the True Light, came into the world; the Word of God became flesh, and it is this Jesus, the Gospel of John wants us to see. And to use the popular saying with a twist, for John, seeing is believing. And in believing, we take part in the Eternal Life, now, and forever.

The stories in John’s Gospel are always talking about these two realities. In the few Sundays we’ve read from John, you remember John the Baptist saying he baptized with water, but Jesus was the one who would baptize with the holy spirit. And Nicodemus was amazed to hear Jesus say no one can enter the kingdom of God unless one is born of water and of Spirit. And to the Samaritan woman from whom he asked for a drink of water from Jacob’s well, Jesus offered the living water.

And all the miraculous works of Jesus told in John’s Gospel have one purpose: that we might believe Jesus is the one sent from God and in believing we might become one, with Jesus, with God, and with one another by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, these works of Jesus are called “signs,” because they are not the end in themselves, nor done to impress, but to reveal who Jesus is, the presence and power of God in the world. And the story given to us this day, raising of Lazarus, is the ultimate sign in more than one sense.

It is ultimate in the sense that it's the last of the series of seven signs Jesus performs in John's Gospel. All the signs, from turning water to wine, to feeding the five thousands and others, reveal the presence and power of God, but this last sign, shows Jesus' power over death.

It is the ultimate sign, also because, Pharisees and the Chief Priest, were becoming more and more alarmed by Jesus, and with this sign, they become determined to kill him. Even so, God so loved the world, God sent Jesus to put that Love in action. All Jesus says and does, is God's love at work.

Now turning to the story, just like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the disciples do not always understand what Jesus means. When Jesus said Lazarus "fell asleep" and that he was going to awaken him, disciples say "if he's only asleep, he'll be alright." Ironically, in their misunderstanding, they were stating the truth that Lazarus will be alright. The word translated here as "will be alright" is the future tense of the Greek word, meaning "will be saved." Yes, Lazarus will be alright, because, in Jesus, Love is at work, saving those who have fallen asleep.

When Jesus is brought to the place Lazarus is laid, Love gets emotional. Jesus was deeply moved, troubled; this word describing what Jesus experienced is a verb, and it does not describe the emotion of sadness or compassion, but rather anger. Actually, Jesus got agitated, angry, to witness how death still held power, causing the deep grief and distress on his beloveds. Some of us know that feeling, too, when a great loss happens it's not just sadness, it comes also with something like anger that this beautiful life is no more.

And then the famous "shortest verse" in the Bible. Jesus wept. Were they the tears of sadness, or anger, or... no matter what kind of emotions were behind them; what Jesus felt was so deep and acute as to move him to tears. It reflects the depth of his love for Lazarus, for Martha and Mary, and for those who surrounded them grieving.

And so, Love acts: Jesus's love for them moves him to raise Lazarus, but not just to console those grieving for the moment, like applying a Band Aid, nor to make Lazarus immortal, for Lazarus eventually does die; he is not one of those characters in the Bible who "never saw death," like Elijah who was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind.

And it is not to yield to the sisters who said, had Jesus come earlier, Lazarus wouldn't have died, or prove himself to those who had said "couldn't he have kept this man from dying?" Then why? Remember this is a sign, and Jesus's prayer tells us why.

First Jesus prays to God, thanking his Father for having heard him. Then, Jesus says he already knew God always heard him, but he said this so that those grieving around him may believe God sent Jesus. Jesus does nothing on his own but everything he does is God's doing through him, and this God is the God who brings life out of death. This work of Jesus, too, was a sign that shows God of the resurrection and life.

Jesus brought Lazarus out of death back to life, but this, he says, is what God does. Death is the last veil between this world and the eternal realm, and God would not let death have the power over Life God has given to God's beloved creation. And that's what God did on that first Easter morning, raising Jesus from death.

The earthly Jesus brought Lazarus back to his earthly life and family, as a sign that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. God raised Jesus out of death back to his Heavenly family, and this Jesus, is our Resurrection and Life, even now. In Him, we have Eternal Life now, and when each of us meet our death, God will call us back to our Eternal Home.

For the Gospel writer John, sin is rejecting and not-believing the truth that Jesus is the One whom God sent to save the world, so we will all "be alright," as the disciples unwittingly said. At the same time, though, faith is not about our ability to believe in something our modern scientific mind finds simply unbelievable. To trust that this incredible story somehow conveys the truth about the Eternal World to which God beckons us is the mystery of faith.

God's radical love at work in the world in and through Jesus is much greater than any sign or miracle that can be reduced to some explainable phenomena. Its incredibility is precisely how these signs speak of God's unfathomable love for us. So, "did this actually happen?" is to miss the point.

Jesus said to Martha, "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. Do you believe this?" And later when Martha alerted Jesus that Lazarus had been dead four days, he said "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

When Jesus says, "those who believe in me," or "If you believed," that "believing" is not put as a prerequisite, or a condition, or a requirement, for the glory of God to be revealed. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, whether anyone believe in him or not. But, "believing" is the only way for us to experience it for ourselves. It is the only way to make that truth, that in Christ we have eternal life, our own truth. When we believe that very act of believing gives us the eye

of faith that enables us to see the glory of God, which is the Love of God that's always at work. Jesus, as God's love made flesh, came to make visible this Love of God at Work, with the signs of his miraculous works, so that we may believe and live the eternal life in Him.

When we trust, or believe in Jesus, we recognize his call, and we respond. Lazarus heard Jesus's call and came out. When we trust in Jesus, it gives us the ear of faith that we can recognize his knock. Jesus is knocking on our doors behind which we retreat from this life to the chamber of lifelessness and despair.

Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life for us, sent from God who so wants us to be alive, even as we live in this death-dealing reality of our daily lives, and precisely as we live in this body that is but dust.

After Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus told those around him to unbind him and let him go. As a believing community, called out of death to life by Christ, we are called to care for one another until all we all live as a heavenly family, even here on earth.

May it be so. Amen.