

"An Unbound Sense of Wonder in a Scientific World?"

John 11:1-45

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I must warn you before we get too far into this sermon, it doesn't have a beginning or an end and I'm not that wild about the middle part either. And the reason is that it's an attempt by me to preach from and about a text with which I have always struggled. Now maybe it's not the text but rather the content which includes the miracle of the bringing of Lazarus back from death to life. Miracles and miracle stories are not something with which I am particularly comfortable. We are a people and a culture whose sense of wonder has been and continues to be challenged. Think about it. Some of you spend your careers doing what 50 or a hundred years ago would be considered miraculous and the rest of us enjoy those miracles without much of a sense of awe. We visit medical professionals who stop diseases from ravaging our bodies which not that long ago would have been a sure sentence of death. We live in buildings made of materials which were hardly known and we read books offering theories of politics, philosophy, and transportation which no one thought of a hundred years ago. All of these would be miraculous but we simply see them as everyday events, ideas. Often we don't view them with any sense of wonder or awe but simply question why they aren't more effective, cheaper, easier to access.

And I am as guilty of this as anyone. My sense of the miraculous may be limited to tomato seeds if you must know. For the last several years I have saved seeds from the previous year's crop of tomatoes and grown plants from them. To me it's simply miraculous that I can do something so incredible as save seeds and have them grow the next year! Perhaps that's why I find it so hard to preach from the miracle stories. I want an easy explanation and not have to work at understanding these passages.

And so we come to Lazarus and the story of his resuscitation. And commentators who are the least bit hung up on the literal want to assure us this story is not a resurrection story but a resuscitation! Now let me start with what I hope are not too shocking statements. First, I have a hard time recognizing this as a historical event. It is outside my experience and my understanding of what a life of faith entails. The story, if we seek to find literal history in it, challenges so much of my understanding of how reality works. But having said that, I also want to celebrate this story and give it credit for making me consider what role such stories play in the life of faith. What role do stories play in our faith journey? And most especially what role do Biblical stories play which don't fit our understanding of how the world "works"?

One of the important understandings regarding the Bible with which we need to come to grips is that it is a book whose stories and poetry are the product of a people of faith who lived anywhere from 2000 to 2500 years ago. The writers in many cases were simply compilers of stories which were part of the culture and which sought to explain the religious history of their society. And in the gospels such as John, we are involved with both attempts to explain why the people believed Jesus was the Christ, the messiah and assure believers that their exclusion from the society and culture into which they had been born was OK, that God continued to love them and was with them. I think most of us know this and have it explained to us numerous times but when we read the Gospel stories and especially the miracle stories I fear we have one of two reactions. We gloss over the stories never really reading them or seeking an explanation for them – let's see

Lazarus wasn't dead just sleeping, there were rocks upon which Jesus walked across the sea. Our second reaction may be just ignore that and let other people deal with it. This latter allows us to develop a faith partially founded in the Bible and the first means we become Biblical rationalists whose spend time with a faith founded in a Bible made to fit their faith. Neither one takes seriously the Bible and each leaves open the possibility of a faith that's easily discarded and/or plays only a minor role in our understanding of reality. What if we use this story as a basis for considering the Bible's role in our faith?

John's gospel is for a community struggling to live out its faith and to understand how it can do that while being driven away from the culture as well as religion which had been the center of life. Written at least fifty years after any of the events could have happened, this gospel seeks to use its stories to explain not only to the believing community but to those who still don't believe Jesus is the messiah why such is true. Its signs, while they may cause us real difficulties with their descriptions of miraculous events, are the means for the writer to explain this ostracized community's willingness to toss away family, economic well being, and other aspects of life as a member of the Jewish community. It is not an easy gospel to read for it openly attacks the Jewish community and/or uses it as the foil against which this new faith is compared. It often seems almost anti-Semitic in its language and its use at times in history has been as a reason for attacks upon the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. It ought not be read as a document arguing against Judaism from the outside but an internal critique which exposes what is probably an almost family fight. Perhaps it might best be understood as a document similar to what one side in the Presbyterian denomination might write about the other in our ongoing debates over sexuality, collective bargaining, etc. Remember when we read John we are reading someone who is struggling to convince non believers of Jesus as Christ as well as support believers who have been forced from their community because of their newfound faith.

Reading the gospels we need as we ask questions of them, we need have the courage of a faith which isn't dependent on a simplistic answer but is one which grows and changes as we do. Now I say that a lot but what it really means is that we need a faith which is open to the scholarship that we bring to the Bible. It is hard for us to read a story in which a man presumed dead is brought back to life. And what I fear is that we miss the meaning then of the story for the early Christian community because of that. The ongoing discussion in which we ought be engaged is one of what does this story mean to me as well as why it's here.

The Bible is very much a human book inspired by God and written in response to God's presence. It is a book which tells the faith stories of people and seeks in most cases to convince the reader, hearer of the reality of God's presence. To do this it is necessary to use the vernacular and the ideas of the day. In the same way, we speak in the language of the 21st Century using ideas common to our era. It is with that language and those ideas that we need to engage the Bible. Such an engagement when based in faith cannot but strengthen that faith for it will be an engagement of honesty and courage and not one of timidity and self deception. And when we do that we will find ourselves not at odds with the Bible but actually in concert with this book which seeks to tell the stories of why people believed. And they did that using the vernacular, the ideas and images of their day.

So my conclusion to this rambling, wreck of a sermon – read the Bible, study it, use all the modern tools you can and grow in faith as you seek to understand it. Pretty simple and I'm sure you've heard it before but like I said this sermon doesn't really have an end. AMEN.