

“Did You See What I Saw?”

John 11:1-6,17-44

March 21, 2010

The Rev. Nancy Enderle

This time of year always reminds me of my Dad. One year, after he listened to me describe the intensity of my Holy Week duties as a Pastor, he made an attempt to bridge his world as a retired basketball coach with this analogy: “Nan, sounds like you’re heading into your state tournament week.” From there on out, that was how we referred to Holy Week – state tournament week indeed. Though the demands of parish responsibilities have lessened for me now that I no longer serve on a church staff, I think of that phrase each year and offer it to my friends who are in the midst of their “state tournament weeks.” For Pastors it truly is “March Madness.”

This morning’s scripture passage from John is like the regional playoffs; it sets up readers for the climax of Jesus’ ministry: the entry into Jerusalem, which begins with Palm Sunday next week, and is followed by Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and finally culminates with Easter.

As we prepare for the events of Easter and Holy Week, the story of the raising of Lazarus offers much to consider. John’s text presents a full and rich story of love and grief and friendship and revelation. It contains a portrait of an emotional gathering of people moving through loss and their own sense of befuddlement concerning who Jesus was and the nature of his ministry. As the story unfolds, the author describes Jesus’ friend Lazarus, as well as Mary and Martha as “beloved.” Jesus loved these people. Both sisters accuse Jesus of failing his friend – and he is described as moved and greatly disturbed in spirit two times in the Chapter. The text later notes that he weeps openly prior to approaching the tomb.

Martha, who just verses earlier seemed on course with Jesus’ program when she confessed that he was the Messiah and Son of God, appears later to misunderstand the power of what that means. In verse 39 she objects to Jesus’ instructions to move the stone from the tomb stating her rather gruesome concern about the amount of decomposition that has already occurred. Her assessment of the moment does not match with the bigger picture that Jesus has been trying to teach and reveal.

There is in much of John, and certainly within this story, a clash between what the followers of Jesus see as reality, and what Jesus is actually attempting to reveal. He seems almost frustrated with that clash in his response to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” His prayer further serves to accentuate this mismatch between who he actually is and how he is regarded by others. He says, and I now paraphrase: ‘Father – you and I know you’re listening but I’m going to pray so all these spectators may finally get the point I’ve been trying to make to them – that **you** sent me.’ The story concludes with Jesus calling out to Lazarus in a loud voice and Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

How is it that Martha – and the other disciples - fail to get the point of Jesus’ ministry this late in the game? How is it that they so grossly misunderstand the deeper significance to which Jesus points? Martha and Mary seem to get part of the way there when they acknowledge that Jesus could have helped while their brother was still alive - if he could have just arrived earlier – but

their vision falls short as they fail to recognize that Jesus is so much more, and can do so much more than they've previously considered possible. The opening prologue of John describes this poetically in the 1st chapter, verses 10-11: "He was in the world; and the world was made by him; yet the world did not recognize him. To his own he came; yet his own people did not accept him."

The inability of the disciples and followers to understand the fullness of Jesus' ministry and message is the subject of volumes of scholarly work on the Gospels. The crude attempt to explain why the disciple didn't get it was that they were, well, just slow. I remember some of the controversy in the 1970's that surrounded Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical Jesus Christ Superstar when he portrayed the disciples as rather dopey in his song, "Look at all my trials and tribulations sinking in a gentle pool of wine." While that isn't a very flattering portrayal, there's more than a little evidence to support the position that those nearest to Jesus missed the fullness of his mission and ministry. The more respectful explanation is that the power of God's revelation in Christ was just too much to bear at once, and the glory of his teaching would need to be unpacked with the help of the Holy Spirit as His story was retold by believers. This was in large part the mission of the early Church as believers participated in the liturgy and experienced his presence in the sacraments.

What can we learn from Mary and Martha and the disciples? This lengthy passage is filled with rich treasures and I encourage you to look at it further in the coming week to discover some of the ways this speaks to your hearts. Today I'd like to lift out two insights to consider: First, is the point that Jesus' miracle is a gift. The power of Lazarus' restoration to life did not depend on whether or not those around Jesus comprehended the moment. To the contrary, the author goes out of his way to illustrate how wrong-headed they were. I don't know about you, but I find great comfort in that. Quite often I miss the mark and blunder my way through faith. It's comforting that there wasn't some cosmic quiz like, "Who Wants To Get a Miracle?" The blessing isn't earned through the cleverness of those involved but rather in spite of their inability to accurately grasp the blessing in their midst..

The other insight I'd like to highlight is the opportunity this story offers us to examine our own approach to the story and our own relationship to the living Christ. Do we also miss the point? Do we fail to realize the power and possibilities of believing in him? The Church I served in downtown Chicago has a glorious stained glass depiction of Christ which serves as the central visual image in the sanctuary; it is positioned front and center and raised high above the chancel. The image portrays him standing with his hands stretched out. When I first arrived to serve that congregation, it was explained to me that the window was designed to show how the living Christ invites us into his arms and opens himself up to us, and that when we fail to respond to Christ's invitation it is as if we take his hands and bind them.

When Jesus asks Martha, "Did I not tell you, if you believe you would see the glory of God," he challenges her and each believer who has heard the story since that day in Bethany, to respond to his invitation to believe, to take his outstretched hand, to see his glory and realize his power. Martha's quite convinced that there's nothing to be done about her brother's situation. In the face of her misunderstanding, Jesus invites her to believe and experience an even greater truth – the very glory of God in her midst. In the face of our misunderstanding, Jesus offers us the same

invitation; the ability to see the glory of God in our midst. To have our vision transformed by our relationship with the living Christ. A vision that enabled Martha, and enables you or me to stand in the midst of the very stench of death, and see life; to encounter loss and see the possibility of hope; to meet head on with a physical limitation and be transformed rather than defined by it.

There are many accounts of inspiring faithful followers who have received this gift of transformational vision in their lives: A heritage that goes back to Paul, who's scales fell off of his eyes and enabled him to experience what he writes as "Joy unspeakable and full of glory, giving thanks to God who gives us the victory, and through whom in all things we are more than conquerors." The Bible also depicts the lives of those first believers who faced persecution and torture, but held firmly to the gifts and power of their faith. I'm sure you can think of examples of people you've encountered who are transformed by the living presence of Christ. Perhaps they serve as mentors in your own faith journey; people who overcame hardship and trauma and discovered the living presence of God sustaining them.

Responding to the open outstretched arms of Christ's invitation to see God's glory leads to this new quality of life. Left to our own, our sight is greatly limited and we can get drawn into and caught up in drama and sorrow, reciting our lists of what is wrong. We easily squander our energy reliving offenses – 'you'll never believe what he said, I can't believe how awful she is... this is going to be the worst thing I've ever had to do... you can't expect us to move that stone away from his tomb.'

There are many examples in literature and philosophy that echoes the theme of how easily we miss the fullness of life around us. The Emily Dickenson poem on the bulletin cover points to that truth. I'm also reminded of Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave in "The Republic." In that Plato asks his readers to imagine people who are prisoners in a cave. Their legs and necks are bound and chained from childhood so that they cannot move and are able only to look in one direction at the cave's low back wall. Behind and above them is a bonfire, and between it and the backs of the prisoners is an endless parade of men carrying displays of the shapes of the world's objects. All the prisoners ever see is the ongoing play of the shadows cast from the organized performance. Plato then asks us to consider what would happen to a prisoner who is released from his chains. Turning around, he beholds the bonfire and behind it the cave's opening. The brightness of the reality of the sun makes it necessary for the prisoner to be guided out of the cave since his eyes cannot quickly adjust to daylight. Once outside he can scarcely believe his eyes: an incredibly beautiful Technicolor world of three dimensions, and presiding over it all the magisterial sun.

The allegory touches upon the human longing to be released from mundane existence with its confining walls of material possessions and unimportant distractions. And it also points us in the direction of the true light that exposes our mistaken, one-dimensional understanding. This longing for life, is what draws us again and again to the drama of the Easter Story with hungry hearts. Show us something, we pray, show us something more than the shadows of form and give us the fullness of life lived in your truth. That's the invitation Jesus offers when he calls Lazarus out of the tomb with a loud voice that will be heard again in two short weeks when he

cries out from the cross; the voice that commands us to step away from death and receive a fuller view of life.

What a perfect time to remember this invitation from the Gospel; the invitation to receive the Easter blessing. It's time for us to complete the Lenten journey of reflection and turn ourselves toward the truth as it is revealed in our holiest of scriptural texts. Get ready to be dazzled. Expect nothing less. Oh, I know you know how it ends, and I know most of you have heard the well-covered terrain of the trip to Jerusalem and Golgatha. But listen again and search for the glory he promised. A gift not bound by our ability to understand as much as it is our ability to receive. Like Mary and Martha – we can bring our grief and sorrow, the limitations of our expectations, and he will meet us there and offer us something more. Whatever is your burden, bring it to the Christ who stands right in the middle of those things that smell like death in your spirit, or in your heart, or in your relationships, or in your physical suffering. He's there, right there saying, see what I can do with this sadness and get ready to be changed by my love.

I encountered a beautiful story about this transforming love and the gift of seeing the glory of God from a Pastor at his retirement dinner. His name was Elam Davies, he preached at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago and was highly regarded as one of the finest preachers in the country. A native Welsh man, Elam was a small man with piercing intensity in the pulpit. He told this story on the occasion of his retirement because it held for him his deepest truth after a lifetime of preaching. The story takes place on top of a huge rock called Orme, in Wales. According to Elam, people went to the top of the Orme to watch spectacular sunsets. He said the sun looked like a ball of fire creating brilliant colors on the ocean, and that people would go there and weep at the beauty.

On one of their evenings at Orme, Elam and his wife Grace were seated in their car when they noticed a rather ramshackle car pull up next to them. In the car he noticed an older couple who had a severely disabled child in the back of their car. Just as the sun as a ball of fire was descending into the gray ocean out there, they came around to the back door of the car and opened it began tugging a little and bringing him to the edge of the seat so that his legs would hang over the seat. And these are now Elams words:

“They scooted him to the side of the seat, but he couldn't lift up his head, and just as the sun in all its magnificence was to give its final burst of glory, as if God were dazzling us by the pyrotechnics of God's universe, they put their finger, the father did and the mother a little later, under this young man's chin and just pointed him out there.

And I knew at that moment, at that very moment I knew that God can dazzle us with all the magnificence of His universe, but that the secret of the universe is a love that comes to us in our frailty and our weakness and our need. It comes to us always asking our highest, but is never nearer to us than when we grope and sometimes grovel in the dust. I knew that the heart of the universe was revealing its glory, not in the sunset altogether, but in that compassion and grace and love which comes to us when we need it most and says there it is, there it is. And there, my boy, you are and you matter...Look up, look up; to this God I commend you, to this God, and I commend ourselves.”

And so we hear the invitation to believe and see— to look, look up, both at the glories of this compassionate God, who in our weakness props us up, that we might see; and the God who gives us opportunities to lift others that they may take in the view as well. As we approach the holiest days of our faith story, may God bless us and transform our vision to receive the fullness of God’s promised glory.

Amen.