

Lent 5 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

March 29, 2020

John 11:1-45

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

This Sunday is the third and final of the so-called scrutinies, three long readings from the gospel of John that open up for deeper reflection, that offer the opportunity for self-examination that is the general purpose of Lent.

Today's reading is the story of Lazarus, who died and was raised back to life three days later by Jesus. The story has many levels, as do most things in the gospel of John. One important aspect of this story is that in this gospel, Jesus' restoration of the life of Lazarus is the trigger event for his arrest and crucifixion. If you were to read a little bit further into chapter twelve you would see that the chief priests plot not only to kill Jesus, but to kill Lazarus. Because the dramatic raising of Lazarus back to life was drawing more people to Jesus, and so by killing both Jesus *and* Lazarus the chief priests hope to permanently terminate the threat that they perceived.

And so there are only twenty verses in John's gospel between today's reading and the event that we call Palm Sunday. But different than the other three gospels, in John's gospel, it is this death and raising of Lazarus that precipitates and keynotes Holy Week. And so it is fitting for the church to read it as well on the last Sunday before Holy Week.

For our purposes today, I call your attention to Jesus' drastic words: "Lazarus, come out!" It's odd that Jesus stands outside the tomb and summons Lazarus by name, with only his voice. There's an enchanting story in Mark's gospel in which Jesus restores life to a little girl. In that story, Jesus makes all of the mourners leave the house, and then with just a handful of his followers, and both the father and the mother, he goes to the girl's bed, and takes her by the hand, and says gently, *Talitha cum*. Which means little girl, get up. Mark, who was writing in Greek, gives us the words in Aramaic. He tells us the girl was twelve. It's a very tender story, with Jesus taking the girl by the hand... there's an almost Sleeping Beauty quality to it.

But in this story of Lazarus, It's the voice of Jesus alone. Standing outside the tomb, calling Lazarus. Come out! And he uses Lazarus' name. And there's a reason why. In the previous chapter— which we always read on the fourth Sunday of Easter— Jesus said: "*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... "I am the good shepherd."*"

This has happened before in this gospel, which has seven great “I am statements.” I am the bread of life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Seven such statements. And that’s a whole other sermon. But last week’s great story of the man born blind followed Jesus’ statement, “I am the light of the world.” So in one chapter, he made that statement. And in the next chapter, Jesus demonstrates what that means. As he gives sight to the blind, he also illuminates spiritual blindness. I am the light of the world.

Today’s gospel follows the good shepherd teaching. Which conveys the intimate connection between a shepherd and his or her sheep. That the sheep respond to the voice. And that the sheep are summoned by name. Now this happens at least twice in the gospel. In the great story of Easter morning, Jesus approaches Mary Magdalene in the garden. And she mistakenly thinks that he is the gardener. Her eyes deceive her, her physical vision does not see. But Jesus calls her by name, and then she recognizes him. And so it is with Lazarus. Jesus calls Lazarus by name, and Lazarus comes out John 10:3. *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”*

Mary Magdalene was at least alive when she mistook Jesus for a gardener. But Lazarus was dead. Three days dead. Stinking body dead. But he heard Jesus calling.

And although part of the intention here is to signify that Jesus brings resurrection in that final and ultimate sense, it also signifies that he is a shepherd, the good shepherd. The one who leave the 99 and goes in search of the missing one. And there are times when you may be that sheep. But Jesus comes seeking you, calling your name, leading you out.

And there is no cave so deep that his voice cannot penetrate it. *Lazarus, come out.*

There is no tomb so dark, no rock so heavy, that he cannot call out your name. *Lazarus, come out.*

There is no hole so deep— even the whole that you may still be digging— there is no hole so deep that he can’t rescue you. *Lazarus, come out.*

There is no casket locked too strong, There is no mummification wrapped so tight, that he can’t set you free. *Lazarus, come out.*

There is no sin so bad, no regret so heavy, no trauma so devastating, no truth so suffocating that Jesus cannot help. *Lazarus, come out.*

There is no pandemic so deadly, no quarantine so lonely, no hospital bed so secluded, that will keep the Good Shepherd from his sheep. *Lazarus, come out.*

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, this great gospel story— this “scrutiny” — sheds light on what Holy Week means for us, what the last days and last supper of Jesus truly imply for our

lives and how we lead them. *“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.”*

The voice that summons Lazarus summons you and summons me. Amen.