

“Word Turns Flesh”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 6, 2022

First Sunday of Lent

Psalm 104:27-34

Rev. John Wahl

John 11:1-6, 17, 32-44

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is the word turned flesh, the divine that comes among us not only in a human form, but also experiencing every human emotion. Here, in this story of the death and rising of Lazarus, we see Jesus deeply disturbed and troubled, even to tears, as he comes to be with Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, who mourn the loss of the brother they loved.

It is not hard for us to empathize with Martha and Mary. During times of grief and worry, we long to be among those we love and who love us. We need their hugs and shoulders to cry into. For too many people, COVID has meant that times of illness and grief happened without the support of a community presence. These sisters knew that Jesus loved them, and their brother; and that was reason enough to ask Jesus to come.

This makes Jesus’ delay in coming all the more surprising. The text tells us that when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was. Why? Because, he says, the illness was not final but intended to give glory to God.

When Jesus does finally arrive, Lazarus is dead and has been in the grave four days. Mary greets Jesus with the same exact words her sister had used earlier: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” This can be read as a statement of fact or a confession of faith or an accusation of indifference; or maybe part of each. In the Jewish tradition, complaint is not incompatible with faith.¹

It is obvious that Jesus is moved with emotion. The people in the crowd can see it and remark on how much Jesus must have loved Lazarus, but some wonder whether there was something he could have done; wasn’t he, after all, the one who had healed the man born blind? When Jesus arrives at the tomb, we’re told, again, that Jesus was deeply disturbed.

If you are following the Lenten devotional, you may have looked on Ash Wednesday at Van Gogh’s “The Raising of Lazarus” which is patterned after Rembrandt’s painting of the same title from the 17th century. The differences in

¹ Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

color and tone are quite striking, but also is the focus. In Rembrandt's work, Jesus is standing above the tomb, arm raised to heaven, calling Lazarus to come out. Van Gogh, on the other hand, does not include Jesus in his painting; rather, he zooms in on the two sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, kneeling at the side of the grave, almost face to face with their beloved brother. The position of their bodies and the look on their faces show shock and anguish.

In this gospel, John paints a picture of Jesus that fully understands that he has come from the Father, and is one with the Father. He knows that Lazarus will be raised to new life. Still, his sorrow is like that of the two sisters: he is pained to the point of tears. It may well be that in his portrayal of this scene, Van Gogh did not want us to focus too much on the majesty of Jesus – the Son of the Father – who had the power to raise the dead to new life. Instead, he portrays the pain and loss – the humanity – that the sisters are experiencing.

When we have lost something – or someone – that we care about, sometimes we what we need most is not the assurance that the lost will be found – or restored to life – but for those around us to have compassion; to acknowledge our grief and mourning. Mary and Martha had called Jesus to come and be there because they knew that Jesus loved Lazarus and loved them, and they loved him. This is who we try to surround ourselves with when we are hurting – those we love and who love us – who will comfort us and help us heal.

Jesus, of course, has not only come to be with Martha and Mary, but to show them what life in him looks like. When the gravestone is rolled away, despite the warnings about the stench that will come out of the tomb, Lazarus emerges alive.

What we know, and Jesus knows, but no-one else in the story knew, is that when Jesus calls Lazarus from the grave to new life, it meant that his own death was growing closer. This would be the last sign – or miracle – that Jesus performs in John's Gospel and proved to be the catalyst for the plot to arrest and crucify him. As Francis Taylor Gench says, "when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, he performs the act that will place him in one."²

Lazarus was beloved by Jesus; he was a friend and follower, a sheep of his own fold. As we learned in last week's reading, Jesus is the good shepherd who willingly risks his life for the sake of those who are his own. No greater love is there than to lay down one's life for a friend.

² Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*

And as we will witness in next week's reading, Jesus is also the servant of those who are his followers, those he loves, stooping down to wash their feet. True love can be seen in kneeling beside those we love and who love us; not afraid to engage in the messy parts of life, the painful moments of pain and loss. Jesus could have gone to Lazarus right away, before death arrived; he could have raised him from the grave before shedding any tears. But, before raising his hand to summon the power of God and shouting, "Lazarus, come out!" Jesus paused to stoop down among his friends and mourn with them.

In this way, the word truly becomes flesh. The early Christians who were the original audience of John's Gospel were likely ostracized and persecuted for their faith. How comforting to know that in their grief and loss, Jesus would come among them and – like with Martha and Mary – form a community of mutual support, placing their hope in the promise that a new and eternal life was not reserved for some time and place far away, but could be experienced in their present circumstances, by loving and serving one another. Nothing could separate them from the love of God revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the same way, the word becomes flesh for us. Jesus is, for us, the place where death ends and new life begins. Like Mary and Martha, we struggle to understand what this means; surrounded as we are by a world at war, a nation divided, and so many people oppressed, abused, or forgotten. From Jesus, we hear the word of life which calls us to confront the stinking places of death and decay with hope. And we see, in Jesus, the one willing to get down on his knees to mourn lost life, and lay down his life to show us that it will be taken up again; that death does not have the final say.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, let us remember that Jesus, the word turned flesh, can understand all that we are and all that we feel. In the face of human anguish, he wept. In the place of human loss, he offers hope for new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.