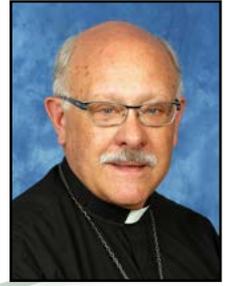




Hear the Word

from Pastor James N. McEachran



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 2, 2017

“Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

John 11:1-45

Our theme has been “Pilgrimage of Life.” You have heard proclamation on a series of readings from the Gospel of John as Jesus moves out towards Jerusalem. Each reading mirroring the five actions of Holy Baptism---

1. The Temptation of Jesus as he uses the Word of God to renounce the power of the Devil three times. And we did too on that Lord’s Day;
2. The encounter with the Pharisee Nicodemus as he seeks new birth, to born again from on high;
3. The time with the woman at the well as she seeks and receives the living water that lasts;
4. The healing of the man born blind who received new sight.
5. TODAY, the account of Lazarus who rose from the death to new life in Christ. (In a text 4 verses *longer* than last week’s!)

Jesus is fresh from giving sight to a man born blind who confesses “‘Lord, I believe.’ And ‘worshipped him.’” Then, He teaches that He is the Shepherd, the good one who “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” and lays “down his life for the sheep.”

The Jews, whom Clarence Jordan calls the “Charter Members,” are divided between seeing Jesus as demon possessed while others acknowledge his power to heal. But, as conflict rises they begin to resist His claim to know God as Father, took up stones to kill him for blasphemy until He escapes and goes beyond the Jordan for safety where “many believed in him.”

It is then that the story begins as he receives a message from beloved friend Mary: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” Yet, seemingly, oddly, He waits two days before acting and says, “This is not terminal, it is ‘that the son of God may be glorified through it.’” First take away truth: IN JESUS, LIFE IS TO BE MEDIATED THROUGH DEATH and in moments death meets Christ at the tomb of a dear friend.

I expect most of us know, this 7th Sign in the Gospel of John is entry into the week we have learned to call “Holy.”

On the road to Bethany, no one asks the kind of illness, the cause, the hope for cure...only the statement of the 12 that going back to Judea could be risky, disciples advancing that friend Lazarus is merely asleep as Jesus says “I am going there to awaken him.” Yet, He makes clear that “Lazarus is dead.” It is not about diagnosis, prognosis, but about believing in Jesus!

Martha (the householder) seeks Jesus at the city limits (some 2 miles from Jerusalem!)...“Lord if you had been here” ...the age old statement we have all made, what could God have done, what might we have done to prevent death, an event, a situation...she has confidence that friend Jesus can make change happen, even in the face of death.

Grief scurry...Martha believes, she goes to Mary, “Teacher is here and calls you.” Mary comes, mourning party follow, Mary meets Jesus and falls to her knees “Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died.” Martha had heard the great “I am.” And soon Mary would trust again too.

To the tomb; Jesus weeps, Jews say “See how he loved him,” some said “Would you think that the one who healed the blind man could have kept this man from dying.” (But, we know, it is not finally about healing, but of death and the glory of God in Jesus!)

So here is the dilemma, the challenge according to what we have heard these past weeks and in the Gospel of John---Can Jesus really pull it off in the face of what seems to be the end of life? That of beloved Lazarus and, in the next period of time, His own death!

What do you think? What and who do you trust? Ready to risk confessing and trusting in the name of Jesus? That is the call of this and every time.

Can this one who makes wine, cleanses the Temple, wins a Samaritan, healing a faraway boy, heals a man ill for 38 years, multiplies loaves, walks on water, opens the eyes of a man born blind, conquer death?

The mourners say, “Lord, come and see” where they laid him. The weeping friend of Lazarus, this Jesus not only bawls and Jesus, as one interpreter (C.H. Dodd has it!), “fumed inwardly and fell into great disquiet” and is caught up in general grief before He acts.

In the midst of an incomprehensible and expression of Jesus as a human being. Who, then, says,
+“Lift the stone.”

+“It stinks in there,” Martha warns.

Jesus reassures her, “Just trust and see the glory of God.”

+Stone lifted,

+Jesus prays...think about that the Son of God prays to the Father: “May they trust and come to believe in me.”

The roar heard round the world:

“Lazarus, come out!”

Want to try that?

“Lazarus, come out!”

Death meets Christ and Christ is the Victor as the Good Shepherd calls him by name in a command that call for one response: confident trust, hope filled belief as the one who was dead is raised, unwrapped, and comes fresh from the tomb as if newborn in the font!

And the story ends quickly...not in some triumphant tour with Jesus and Lazarus raised to win others, but in a simple command “Send him home.” This beloved friend of Jesus is restored to Mary and Martha and in Christian arts is most often symbolized coming out of the water as newborn in the Lord Jesus Christ, like you and like me and those who call Jesus by name!

Here is the important truth...not a word from or about Lazarus, or Mary, or even Thomas. What matters is not about their histories, but what Jesus has accomplished by the power of God.

Next important take away: THE TRUE STORY OF JESUS’ DEATH IS TO BE NARRATED IN THE NEXT TWO WEEKS. Jesus gives life to the dead, but only at the ultimate cost of his own life. For God so loved the world...that he gave/sent...the Son...so that all who believe might not perish but may have eternal life.

Yesterday, at Washington Memorial Park, we marked the commitment of Freda S to her final resting place. I arrived early, sat beside an empty grave and recalled our Gospel text...a friend of Jesus, Lazarus; a beloved mother and friend, Freda...recalling the One who calls us to trust that the God who is for us in Christ abides with us we abide in him. Growing in confidence that our life is about the witness we share about what Jesus means for us, today and forever.

In a way I cannot easily explain, the words I spoke bring me to the cusp of celebrating the truth that will once again bring us back to the Font at Easter Vigil.

I said: "We commit our beloved Freda to the ground...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, IN THE SURE AND CERTAIN HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE."

Once reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we claim the faith we confess---to believe in "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Sealed by the one who said, "I am resurrection and life...believe in me, live...believe in me never die!"

In Jesus name, it is so, Amen!