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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

April 2, 2017

Text: John 11:1–45

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I would like to borrow the question we heard last week from John 9:2. You may recall...our Lord's disciples saw a man born blind and they asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" I would like to change the question to fit today's reading from John 11. "Who sinned, Lazarus, his family, or possibly his friends, that he died?" Once again we are faced a very natural tendency to find a logical, cause and effect, relationship between suffering and evil. What was the cause of the man's congenital blindness? What was the cause of Lazarus' untimely death?

The answer Jesus gave in John 9:3 to the disciples' original question was "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." In other words, suffering and evil do not always have antecedent, that is, a cause that necessarily leads to a tragic result. When facing evil, the Christian response is not primarily one of research – What caused this? – *but rather repentance, turning away from sin and evil, and looking in faith to Christ trusting that He will use it to reveal His saving works.*

Jesus provides a similar statement about how we should view the death of Lazarus in particular, and death in general. Jesus receives word from Martha and Mary that their brother, Lazarus is sick. Upon hearing this news Jesus says, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (vs. 4). God will be glorified in this illness. His works will be displayed in Lazarus. This is the position of Christian faith that I want to keep before you throughout this sermon. When we face sins, suffering, evil, and even death, we believe that God's works will be displayed through them and that He will be glorified in His redeemed people by His gracious work.

It is most curious that after hearing about Lazarus' illness, Jesus waits two days before He decides to leave. Only after two days does Jesus reveal His intention to His disciples of traveling to Bethany, the home of Lazarus. In spite of His disciples' objections to returning to Judea, our Lord declares it is time to awaken Lazarus from

his sleep (vs. 11). The disciples misunderstand, thinking Jesus is referring to Lazarus taking a nap. So our Lord speaks plainly. “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe” (vs. 14–15). One of the divine works that must be accomplished is the disciples will believe. What He wants them (and us) to believe will be become clear shortly.

Jesus finally arrives in Bethany. Martha runs to where Jesus is. She 1) presents her complaint and 2) she shows her faith; notice she has both at the same time. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you” (vs. 21-22). Why did Lazarus die? Because Jesus was absent! If only You had been here. Mixed with this bitter disappointment is an open-ended cry of faith, “I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Either way, complaint and faith are focused squarely upon Jesus. And that’s exactly where they need to be!!!

Have you ever felt that way about God? Bitter disappointment and faith mixed together? I know I have. Scriptures remind us that the Lord Jesus does not see things as we do. Our faith holds to the promise of Christ working in the midst of evil and bringing good from them, maybe even in spite of them. Jesus calls us to repentance and faith, trusting that God’s work will be manifested to His glory and our good.

Jesus calms Martha, “Your brother will rise again” (vs. 23). Sure Jesus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (vs. 24), but what help is that now? Martha doesn’t ask that question but it’s implied. Then our Lord gives one of the most well-known and comforting promises in the entire Bible, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (vs. 25-26). Martha and you dear Christian believer, life and resurrection are found *in Me* not the Last Day. Believing in Jesus, the Son of God, gives life yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb. 13:8). The living and the dead participate in Christ’s resurrection life.

Our hope is not in an event at a particular time, such as the Last Day; rather, our hope is in the One who is resurrection and life. “On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ” (Small Catechism). The events of the Last Day bring great joy and hope to us Christians because we will see Jesus, and not only Jesus, but also Lazarus, all our loved ones who have died in the faith, yea, all of Christ’s redeemed people. For we, the saints redeemed by Him who is resurrection and life, are no longer subject to the power and finality of death.

Listen to vs. 25–26 again but with explanation and expansion. Note how vs. 25 speaks about the Christian believer who has died but lives and how vs. 26 describes the living believer who will never die. Jesus said, (vs. 25) “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die (physically), yet shall he live (spiritually for eternity), and (vs. 26) everyone who lives (physically) and believes in me shall never die (eternally for he has eternal life). “Whoever believes in Jesus, in life as in death, participates in the resurrection and life that Jesus is and that he gives” (Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, p. 396). The work Jesus is performing is the establishing the faith of His people: resurrection life and victory over sin, death, and misery are found in the Lord Jesus Christ who is resurrection and life.

Martha goes back to tell Mary that Jesus has arrived and is calling for her (vs. 28-29). When Mary arrives she greets Jesus in a similar way as Martha did earlier, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died” (vs. 32). Another example of complaint and faith mixed together.

“When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled” (vs. 34). Here we learn what Jesus thinks and feels about death. English translations do not do justice to Jesus’ reaction. Our Lord is deeply moved with anger over Lazarus’ death so much so that His troubled spirit reacts with an extreme, visceral groaning or wailing. It’s at this point that Jesus tells Mary and Martha to take Him to Lazarus’ tomb.

Upon arriving at the tomb, that same anger and visceral groaning reoccur. Death is a revulsion and it must be destroyed. John Calvin, a 16th century churchman, describes Jesus’ reaction to seeing Lazarus’ tomb with these striking words, “Christ does not come to the sepulchre as an idle spectator, but like a wrestler preparing for the contest. Therefore no wonder that He groans again, for the violent tyranny of death that He had to overcome stands before His eyes” (Ridderbos, p. 402). Martin Luther describes this battle poetically and powerfully in the fourth stanza of his great Easter hymn (LSB 458), “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”:

It was a strange and dreadful strife When life and death contended;
The victory remained with life, The reign of death was ended.
Holy Scripture plainly saith That death is swallowed up by death,
Its sting is lost forever.

Jesus came to do battle with death. There can only be one winner. Remember, Jesus said Lazarus’ death will lead to God’s glory and people will believe.

The crowd sees Jesus' strong emotions. And for a third time, Jesus is blamed for Lazarus' death, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" (vs. 37). Three times Jesus is blamed for not stopping Lazarus' death. No more. Jesus gives the command, "Take away the stone" (vs. 39). But it's too late Jesus. What you'll find inside is unthinkable and should not be disturbed. Jesus is determined, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God" (vs. 40).

With a loud voice, the thrilling cry of victory and life is given, "Lazarus, come out" (vs. 43). Lazarus, who has been dead 4 days, obeys!!!! He comes forth wrapped in his burial garments. Jesus commands them to "unbind him, and let him go" (vs. 44). When Jesus speaks to the dead, there is action. The dead hear and obey.

In Lazarus' resurrection, we see our victory over death and the grave; we see God's glory; we see our resurrection life. A few days later, Jesus went to Jerusalem and secured this resurrection life for the world. Many saw what Jesus did and "believed in Him" (vs. 45). Jesus accomplished His work. Faith in Jesus, who is resurrection and life, was created!

Dear saints, at this moment in time you live in our Lord's resurrection life. Our baptism into Christ indicates "... that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Small Catechism). Because you are alive in Christ, your physical body will be resurrection after the same fashion as the Lord Himself. "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11b).

Sin, death, and the grave are defeated enemies for they are consumed by Him who is resurrection and life. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Rejoice dear people of God and live in His joyous victory.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.