

## **Sermon – November 2, 2009**

### **Unbound**

I saiah 25:6-9, John 11:32-44

*Please pray with me:*

*Ah Lord, help us to turn to you with hearts and lives open to your presence, your power and your peace. Fill us with assurance of the life that is ours - abundant, eternal and new - through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. And may these words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

I went for a walk this week. It was a beautiful afternoon, but windy and wild, and brightly festive with the flaming colors of leaves flying across the blue sky. I began to notice the black outlines of the trees as they were being stripped of their summer clothing. They looked a bit like the skeletons that leered from some front porches. Jack-o-Lanterns grinned eerily along my way, and here and there, I came across tombstones, ghosts and mummies all ready for Halloween. In the spite of the brightness of the afternoon, I found myself pondering death—the death of the year, made so evident by the dying of the leaves.....the death of all the saints—all our loved ones—who have gone before us .....and all the other little deaths of spirit that these ghoulish ghosts and goblins might represent for me.

The Halloween decorations certainly got me started, but then of course, simmering in my sub-consciousness was the scripture text designated for this All Saints Day—a Bible story of death and tomb stones, of ghastly sobs and wailings, of caves and mummies—a story that certainly trumps any of the ghostly scenarios I saw depicted on my neighbors' lawns.



The story today comes to us from the Gospel of John, a gospel full of the signs that for John were living proof of a living God. The first part of the gospel culminates here in the most amazing sign of all. Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, is sick. His sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus to come quickly, but Jesus does not seem at all hurried by their summons. In fact, he stays two days longer where he is, until he pronounces with certainty, "Lazarus is dead." By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Jewish custom required that the dead be buried immediately. They believed that the soul lingered near the body for three days, so the fact that this is now the fourth day since Lazarus's death indicates its finality. Lazarus is certifiably dead, and the rituals of mourning are fully underway. Into this scene of death, in the midst of the wails and sobs of grief, Jesus arrives. Listen to the Good News for all of us today, as it comes from the Gospel of John 11:32-44 -

***When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.***

***Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, there is already a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."***

Unbind him, and let him go. Unbind him from the wrappings of death. Unbind him from the grief of his mortality. Set him free from the cave of despair. Unbind him and let him go.

I want to make clear that this is not a story about immortality. The scripture goes to some lengths to prove that Lazarus is dead. He—like all of us—is mortal. As a professor once bluntly said to me: We are all leaving this place, we just don't know when. We shall all die, for that is a fact of life. Death is the one common denominator – the Great Leveler.

On this All Saints day, as we remember those who have met their own mortality, as we think of those who have gone on before us, perhaps you weep too. For those who confront the number of their days clearly spelled out in diminished strength of mind and body, you may weep too. For those of you who grieve the loss of a job, or an identity, or a hope or a home, you may weep too. Life brings tears. As Lutheran pastor Phyllis Kersten points out,<sup>1</sup> we come into the world crying. We cry when we are hungry or wet or tired or when we need someone to hold us – no matter how old we are. We cry when we are moved by beauty or by evil. We cry at a good movie—whether happy or sad. We cry at weddings. We cry at funerals. Some of us even cry at dog food commercials.

And into the midst of our weeping steps Jesus. Martha is crying, Mary is crying, the whole town is reduced to tears. And the shortest verse in the Bible spells out Jesus' reaction. Jesus wept.

If anyone believed in the resurrection, it was Jesus. Yet he wept. Jesus weeps, not for Lazarus, but for his friends whose grief rips at his heart. Jesus reveals to us a God who suffers with us: One who shares our agony and anger and tear. God is present in tragedies large and small that make us cry. As one who learned the depths of human suffering while living among us, Jesus joins his friends in the brokenness of their grief, and he weeps.

This encounter with the pain of death comes with all the typical “if onlys.” If only you had been here, Jesus. If only. Don’t we say that? If only he had taken better care of himself. If only they’d gotten a second opinion. If only she hadn’t gone out in the storm. If only he’d called me. If only I’d visited more often. If only. If only. In all the deaths we experience, we look for someone to bear the blame. As Kersten wrote: “Like Mary and Martha, who blamed Lazarus’s death on Jesus’ late arrival, we sometimes blame God for our losses, or blame others or even ourselves for doing too little too late. But in the process of blaming, we blind ourselves to the most important reality in the graveyard—the presence there of the one who weeps unashamedly out of love for us and who acts on our behalf.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus acts. He does something. Jesus steps forward to demonstrate the truth of what he said to Martha on the way to the graveyard: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live (John 11:25).” Yes, Martha had previously acknowledged her belief in the resurrection on the last day, but here and now? Surely not, dear Jesus! After four days, the dead man stinks!

No one expects that life can come out of death. No one—not even the dead man's sister—grasps that Jesus is the life-giving power of God. But Jesus persists. In the midst of the oppressive presence of death—above the wails of grief, between the tombstones of the grave yard, despite the stench of decay—Jesus demonstrates that God's loving power for life is at work now—now—even now—to overthrow the power of death.

"Come out of that dark cave," Jesus says, and out comes Lazarus, trailing his grave clothes behind him. Come out of that dark cave, Jesus calls to you. Come out of the dark cave where anxieties and fear of the unknown dwell. Come out of the cave that traps you in shame or despair. Come out of the cave that holds the shadows of death and roll back the stone to the light of life, new life, abundant life, eternal life. Come out and meet Jesus. Come into the light.

Lazarus comes forth, they unwind him from his bindings, and in a very short time, he hosts a dinner party for Jesus (Jn. 12:1-2). He rises to serve Jesus. Maybe it's a dinner party like the one Isaiah foretold: A feast of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. Maybe it's a table like the one we have here before us. For in Jesus we have all the reason to celebrate what Isaiah described: the compassion of the Man who suffers with us, the power of the God who swallows up death forever, and the love of the Savior who promises to wipe away every tear from our eyes (Is. 25:6-8).

---

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Kersten. *Reflections on the Lectionary*. Christian Century. 10-20-09. p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*