

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 26 March 2023
Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year A

1st Reading: *Ezekiel 37:1-14*

Psalm: 130

2nd Reading: *Romans 8:6-11*

Gospel: *John 11:1-45*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

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

Do you have a favourite vacation spot, or a place you like to visit frequently? And if so, is there someone who lives there that you like to get together with? Maybe you even stay in their home. Or maybe you like to meet up with another family who also always likes to go to that same spot, whom you've known for many years?

When I was a lad, my favourite place to visit was Colorado. It was a long drive there, but my Uncle Al and Aunt Marie lived there in Greeley, and of course we would always stay at their house. And from there we would usually take a trip into the Rocky Mountains. When I was about 10 years old, my older brother David and I even stayed an entire summer there when our mother was recuperating from cancer surgery.

But I do know that there are some people both here in the States and in England who always plan their vacations in order to meet up with special friends that they want to spend time with.

Jesus spent most of his time with his disciples in Galilee, in the northern part of the Holy Land. But as John tells us, he also made frequent trips down south to Jerusalem, sometimes with his disciples, and sometimes by himself. He wasn't exactly on vacation when he arrived there. He continued his ministry of teaching and healing, but he doesn't seem to have been working the entire time. And we know that he did have at least one family of good friends whom he visited there, and with whom he stayed in comfortable surroundings: The two sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany, and their brother Lazarus.

Jesus would have gone to Jerusalem at least three times a year for the great feasts described in the Torah, but John also indicates that he was there for other festivals as well. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem was only about 70 miles, not very far by our standards, but if we had to walk all the way there and back, it would have taken time and effort. And so it seems that Jesus was able to enjoy the time he spent in Bethany with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

We also know that Peter was Jesus' star pupil, and I've also talked about John as the Teacher's pet - the disciple whom Jesus loved, as John refers to himself - but Mary and Martha were rather different friends, although Mary, as we hear about later in John as well as in the other Gospels, did behave as one of Jesus' students. So what was so special about these three siblings that drew Jesus to them and made it possible for him to relax in their presence and become their friend?

It has become popular to think of Jesus as rather poor, a beggar even as some would have it, but if we pay attention to what the Gospels tell us about him, we hear a rather different story. For one thing, Jesus' mother Mary was from a priestly family, and the priests were the highest class in Jewish society, so Jesus was actually quite well-to-do. And remember those gifts given to him as a baby by the wise men - gold, frankincense and myrrh - kingly gifts which God had supplied through them to Mary and Joseph to help out their fledgling family, gifts which would hardly have been lavished upon an impoverished couple.

Jesus did *choose* to live a life as a travelling teacher rather than follow in his foster-father Joseph's footsteps, who would have earned a very good living, but even as such a teacher, Jesus was following a respectable tradition, and he reminds his own disciples that they would be able to earn their living from preaching the Gospel. And Luke tells us that Jesus' ministry and his academy, as we might call his group of students, was supported financially by some very wealthy patrons. Among these patrons were Mary Magdalene, and Mary and Martha of Bethany.

In the very next chapter of John's Gospel, after the story we read this morning, we hear about how Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus with very expensive perfume in thanks for his raising her brother from the dead, and we hear just how much that perfume was worth - 300 denarii - which would have been a full years salary of an ordinary worker - tens of thousands of dollars in today's money - quite an extravagant gesture on Mary's part. No wonder it made Judas jealous enough to think it worth his while to betray Jesus to his opponents.

And what of Lazarus? Well, it is interesting that he is only mentioned in relation to his sisters, so he was not the head of the household, even though he was the only man. This says to me that he must not have been of age, but was their younger, perhaps teenage brother.

And why does any of this matter to us here today? I think it is helpful to us because John shows us in this one story how Jesus is fully divine and yet fully human at the same time. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, who is able to bring us all back from the dead because he was able to bring Lazarus back from the dead. And yet we hear throughout this story about how dear Lazarus was personally to Jesus. He is the only person in any of the Gospels apart from the disciples themselves that Jesus calls his “friend”: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”

And it is only in this passage that we are ever told that Jesus laughed or cried. When he comes to the tomb, and sees Mary weeping, Jesus, too, weeps for Lazarus, even though he is about to raise him from the dead. Even though as God Jesus is the resurrection and the life, as a man he still weeps for Lazarus.

Lazarus was a real person, who lived and breathed and was Jesus’ friend. And Jesus would also tell his disciples a little later in John’s Gospel that “you are my friends if you do what I command you”. So if Jesus could be Lazarus’ friend and raise him from the dead, he can also be our friend if we do what he commands us and he will likewise raise us from the dead.

Oh, and one other little note about Lazarus. It is unfortunate that when Holy Week arrives we rush through the Passion narratives in the Gospels, and do not have time to pause and really think about them in detail, but there is one detail I would like to highlight today. Have you ever wondered how we know about what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? The disciples were off by themselves sleeping, so who would have heard him? Jesus himself certainly didn’t have the chance to tell his disciples about his prayer. Well, I think the Gospel of Mark has left us a little clue.

Mark tells us that after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, “all the disciples left him and fled, but a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” So who was this young man? One answer that is often given is that this was Mark, the author of the Gospel, himself, but this can’t be the answer for a number of reasons - the most important being that we know from other sources that Mark never met Jesus.

For me, the obvious answer is that this young man was Lazarus, Jesus’ dear friend, who had recently been brought back from death by Jesus, who then secretly followed Jesus and the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, and watched everything that happened there, so that he was later able to report what he had seen to the disciples so that they, and we, could know what Jesus had endured in the Garden as he prayed earnestly to God. What a blessing it is that because of this, we also know what Jesus endured for our sake in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Amen!

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