

First Presbyterian Church
John 11:1-45, “Jesus Wept”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/2/2017

Today we are continuing with the Lectionary’s gospel selections which are following a path through the Gospel of John.

In reading John 11, I am reminded that the Bible is merely a list of principles to apply. If it were about eternal principles, then we would read with an aim to dislodge the secret truth that was hidden inside the worthless husk of a story.

No the Bible is a great story – a true story – filled with nuance and surprise, and we have a wonderful example of that in our passage today.

The story has important roots in chapter 10, where Jesus makes people so mad in Jerusalem that they try to take him and stone him. But he “slips from their grasp,” however you imagine that happening.

He then travels back across the Jordan river to where John the Baptist used to hang out. And it’s there that he receives the news that his friend Lazarus was sick in the town of Bethany.

John makes sure we realize that Lazarus is the brother of Mary – who anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume and wiped them with her hair – and the brother of Martha.

We also know of the Mary and Martha story where Mary sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha makes all the preparations for guests, but complains about not getting enough help.

So this is a family that Jesus is extremely close with, even their sibling squabbles,

Word was sent from Mary and Martha to Jesus by messenger that the one Jesus loves is sick. Jesus says he will go back to Judea (the same place where people just tried to kill him).

Jesus declares, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”

But then, something strange happens in v. 6:
he delays his journey back to Judea by two days.

We're left wondering: Why does Jesus both insist on returning
to his friend by a dangerous route, *and* delay his arrival?

As it turns out, Jesus knows that Lazarus has died
and by the time they arrive in Bethany, he's been in the tomb four days.

Martha comes out to meet Jesus on the road, while Mary stays back.

In his dialogue with Martha, he tells her Lazarus will rise again.
Thinking he was giving her a promise about the future, she says,
"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

But Jesus replies, "I am the resurrection and the life.
The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;
and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

Then Mary comes out to meet Jesus, and the crowd of friends and family
follow her, and she comes to Jesus and throws herself at his feet –
the same feet she had anointed with perfume, and she's weeping,
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

She's angry and grieving. Why didn't he come sooner?
Doesn't he love Lazarus?
Tears stream down the faces of her friends as well.

When Jesus sees this, he doesn't rely on some distant theological principle.
He doesn't keep the fragile experience of humanity at arm's length.
It says in verse 33, that Jesus was deeply moved in his spirit and troubled.

And when he is shown the tomb, Jesus wept.

Jesus wept.

Why, would Jesus be troubled in his spirit, when he had declared back in v. 4
that Lazarus would be raised in order to glorify the Son of God –
that is, to reveal the true nature of Jesus? Why does Jesus weep?
Why does it say in v. 38 that Jesus was *once more deeply moved*?

The people there see this display of emotion,
and they remark, “See how he loved him?”

Jesus wept because his friend had died, and he loved him.
The word love here is not John’s favorite “*agape*” love,
the unconditional love of God found all over in this book.
The word for the love of friends – *philia* – to describe the relationship
between Jesus and Lazarus.

And so he gives the command in v. 39, “Take away the stone.”
Martha, pragmatist, warns of an offensive odor.
No matter. Roll it away.

Jesus prays to God the Father, and called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen,
and cloth around his face.

A terrifying vision for us, but Lazarus was no zombie: he had been raised to life.

These are elements of this story
that you can only pick up on when you read the Bible *as a story*.

This story, told in this way, reveals to us that Jesus is not gum-ball machine
that you put a quarter in and receive a miracle from.
Jesus enters into our experience at a deep level and is moved,
is pained, is grieved right alongside of us.

Even though Jesus knew what was going to happen,
even though he knew this would reveal his true nature
to advance God’s mission in the world,
he was also drawn in by the emotional power of the moment,
by the reality that his own friend had died.

The raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own resurrection,
where he will encounter Mary again by a tomb with a stone rolled away.

It is also the last thing Jesus does in this gospel
before gathering with the disciples in private
and waiting for the plot of the Pharisees and the Chief Priest to unfold.

Like the story of the Bible, the story of your whole life matters to God.
Your life cannot be boiled down to a pithy line or characteristic –
and beware if you catch yourself trying to be so simplistic
in the telling of your life story.

We are likely to be duped by narcissism:
“My life is about one great accomplishment after another –
I am really something special.”

Or we can be duped by a kind of ‘worm theology’,
“My life is really nothing special – I probably won’t ever
amount to anything in this world
and I doubt that even God would bother to notice me.”

Both of these approaches miss out in the nuances in our own lives.
None of us are perfect, and none of us are worthless.

My friends, Jesus is the resurrection and the life –
and we will enter fully into that reality in two weeks on Easter.
But today, as we journey through Lent,
let us also remember that Jesus wept.
He wept with Mary, and he weeps with you.