

## **BELIEVE AND YOU SHALL SEE ...**

When Jill first asked me if I would be willing to come back up here and share another sermon with you, my first instinct was to say, "Not yet." But, she prevailed, so my next instinct was to say, "I'd rather not be held to a lectionary text." Again, she prevailed so what I am going to explore this morning is based on the lectionary readings for today. It sure is good to have you back with us, Jill!

Please turn to John 11: 1-45 in your pew Bibles and join me in reading a very familiar story. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

Growing up I'm sure you also heard this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead and viewed it as quite a miracle that our Lord performed. We know that miracles were his business and that this was one of his best – if not the absolute best. We know that this man, Lazarus had been dead for 4 days and that his sisters Mary and Martha were understandably distraught and that they obviously knew of this man, Jesus and his ability to perform amazing things. And, we know that Jesus was not far from Bethany and could easily be summoned to the aid of these women.

So, just what happened when Jesus visited Bethany? When Martha heard that Jesus had come to their town, she left her house and went to meet him. Mary, on the other hand stayed at home and being the good hostess that we know she was continued there with the friends who had come to console her. But, when Martha returned and

told her that “the teacher” was there, she knew immediately that Jesus had come and she left to go to her brother’s tomb. Hearing of Jesus referred to as a teacher is not one bit unusual as we know that he had been teaching since he was a very young man. But, the subtlety in this passage is the fact that he seized the opportunity – in education we call it the “teachable moment” to share his faith with these friends of Mary and Martha. Since they assumed that Mary was leaving them to go weep at her brother’s tomb, they followed so that they could continue to comfort her. But, what they encountered was not a grieving sister, but this teacher who was not totally welcome in this neck of the woods and certainly not totally understood.

When we first are given a glimpse of the interchange between Jesus and these people, they are at the tomb. He did not query them about Lazarus nor did he ask them to give him a reason why he should intercede. What he did though was to tell them along with their friends that if they would believe, they would see the glory of God. If they believed, they would see the glory of God. He didn’t tell them that Lazarus would see the glory of God, but that through their faith, that the glory of God would be revealed unto them – to Mary and to Martha along with the crowd that had followed them to the tomb.

And, the beautiful part of this is that through his total unselfish love for his brothers and sisters of the world, our Lord was taking another great risk in the presence of this crowd. On his previous trip to Bethany he had been threatened and He knew quite well

that he was subject to the harshest criticism and the ultimate penalty for sharing His faith in this land. But, it did not stop him – he did not turn away or attempt to hide his faith; he stood firm and tall and spoke with the love and grace of God. He told this group of family and friends that if they would believe, that they would see the glory of God. But, we also must not forget that very shortly after this visit to Bethany, our Lord faced the trial by Pontius Pilate.

A little over 10 years ago, our family experienced an event that has forever changed how we look at prayer and how we look at faith and even how we look at life. What started out with all of the makings of a tragedy was soon transformed, through the faith of more people that we can begin to name, into an amazing witness of God's remarkable presence and love.

One of my cousins, John, was involved in a very bad accident. It was a very cold, sub-freezing morning and he got his jacket caught in the drive shaft of an engine that powered a very large pump. In a matter of seconds, his life was nearly taken from him. He was spun around inside the pump house with the hood of his jacket caught in the machinery. It only took one revolution but his feet broke the rafters and the rafters broke his feet. He was slammed into the housing of the pump and engine and suffered severe internal injuries but by far the most life threatening injury was that his arms were traumatically amputated just below his shoulders. He was thrown free of that contraption and landed up against a wall. We really don't know how long he waited,

but we speculate that it was ten or more minutes before he was found and then another ten or more minutes before medical help arrived. In our small town, that help was two paramedics – the nearest hospital was 30 miles away and the nearest trauma center was 75 miles away. The primary helicopter was grounded for repairs and a backup was dispatched to meet the ambulance. He arrived at the trauma center still conscious and was able to talk to the surgeon. He was immediately given 10 units of universal donor blood. There was not time to type or cross match the blood and the risks of incompatibility were extreme.

Now, back at home, word travels fast – it is a small town. We really didn't know how much the town cared until we began to see an amazing faith response materialize before our eyes. When I drove into town that evening I was brought to tears by the signs that lined the highway. There were a total of 26 signs – some of those yellow flashing signs, some signs normally used to advertise the price of sirloin, some used to sell cars and some made out of computer paper and hung from buildings. Each one, though, carried a very simple message, "Pray for John Newbold." His accident that morning had literally brought the whole town to its knees in prayer. It was amazing and it was gut wrenching at the same time. To know that so many people cared and that so many people were taking time to pause and ask for God's mercy for John was truly amazing. Here was an untold number of people who were believing.

The next morning I arrived at the hospital fairly early and as I stepped off the elevator standing there were John's wife, sons and brother along with a number of other family members. And, standing with them was a man in a white coat who I later learned was the head of the trauma unit. He was explaining that there was a 1 in 30 chance for one unit of universal donor blood to match, and for 10 units the odds were over 1 in a million. And, what he said next was, "I cannot explain it scientifically, it can only be an act of God because all 10 units were a perfect match." And, for all of those believers back home who believed and prayed the glory of God was evident.

The second point of this story of Jesus and Lazarus that has a strong parallel to the story of John and his recovery is the simple fact that our Lord looked to God in prayer and first gave thanks. To some, I'm sure that was a very odd invocation – to stand before the tomb of a beloved brother and friend and tell God, "Thank you." For us in today's world, knowing our Triune God and knowing the power of prayer, we have been taught and are comfortable first saying, "Thank you" and then making our petitions known to God. But for Jesus to approach the tomb of someone who had been dead for 4 days and first thank God might have seemed just a little out of the ordinary to the people who were gathered there and who weren't sure about the faith of this tall stranger in their midst.

The night of the John's accident as I tried to quiet my mind and focus on God and to pray, I struggled with what to ask God to do. I was forgetting that very important

lesson of praying in thanksgiving first. I turned to my Bible and rather mindlessly, I let it fall open without any attempt to turn to a particular passage. I guess I was going toward Psalm 23 – what I think of as heavenly comfort food. I did open my Bible to the book of Psalms, but not to the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but to those closer to the end. And, every single psalm that I read began, “Praise God.” Now, there is no doubt that God was sending me a very powerful message that night and teaching me a very important lesson about prayer. My heart was telling me to ask God to make John whole again; my head told me that was impossible. I was so filled with the horror of the accident that I didn’t know just how to pray or what to ask God to do. Was it right to ask that John live in such a drastically changed way? It surely didn’t seem right to ask God to take him to heaven – that seemed wrong too. What I realize now what I was being told was to be grateful and to trust in that perfect will that is only God’s. So, I prayed and gave God my gratitude for this cousin who was so badly injured and I didn’t ask for anything specific from my wish list, but only asked that God’s will be done. My faith grew exponentially in those next days and weeks. Just as Jesus had told Mary and Martha and their friends, God was telling me, “Believe and you shall see the glory of God.”

Now I don’t want to stand up here and sound like some sort of Pollyanna Preacher Person and lead you to believe that God gives us everything we want or for that matter that our faith is a guarantee of blessings and light in all that we do. We know from the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ that there are days of light and nights of darkness. After all, it was just a short time after this miracle was performed in Bethany

that Jesus shared His Last Supper with the 12 disciples and then he went up to the Mount of Olives to pray – to spend that wretched night when his closest friends could not even stay awake with him and when he would pray to God to “take this cup” from him.

And, we know that the next day, Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate, convicted and sentenced to death and that before the sun set, he had been nailed to the cross and died and then laid to rest in a tomb very much like the one from which Lazarus was commanded to rise. And, then of course, we know that the Glory of God was fully made known on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day when Jesus also rose from the dead.

So, even though there will always be times in the garden for each of us, even those of us whose faith is firm, we have God, through the Holy Spirit with us. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “...if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” My friends, that is the gift of hope that shines through the darkness of the midnight hour in the garden and it is hope that we have because of God’s unselfish love.

This past Friday, there was a cartoon in the paper that was very simple, but also very meaningful. It was “Lockhorns” that simple one cell cartoon that is usually fraught with sarcasm and Friday’s was no exception. The scene showed the two main characters

and the caption said, "For Lent, Leroy gave up hope." That is not the point of Lent at all, the hope that we have through the Lord Jesus Christ shines through the darkness of the Lenten season. But, the essence of this season – that time when we are to reflect on our own mortality and on the fragile nature of humanity in this world of flesh and blood is captured in the satire of this cartoon. Yes, we do need to focus on those long and dark nights of "garden time," but, our lives are not a satirical cartoon and we should never "give up" hope. As long as we believe, we will see the Glory of God revealed to us in the simple, but sometimes complex; and the truthful, but sometimes painful way that can only come from the One who created us, the One who redeemed us and the One who sustains us.

Yes, our God does work in mysterious ways revealing to us magnificent wonders. If we will believe, we will see... For this lesson of faith and love and grace and glory, we give thanks and praise. Amen.