

The Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A
April 10, 2011 ~ Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45
Fr. Jim Cook

“Which Character Are You Today?”

For the last couple of weeks, I’ve been harboring bad thoughts about the editors of our Sunday lectionary, because of how long the gospel readings have been.

Two weeks ago, we heard the story of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman by the well; that was thirty-seven verses. Last week, we heard the story of how Jesus healed the man who had been born blind; and that was forty verses. And today we’ve heard the story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead; forty-four verses. And I’m sure you won’t be surprised to hear that the gospel reading for next Sunday, Palm Sunday, will either be forty-five verses, or a whopping one hundred twenty-six verses! God have mercy on us all. Amen.

However, as grumpy as I was, at our lectionary editors, at the beginning of this past week, by the end of the week I was positively glowing with warm thoughts about them. And the reason was because those editors had the insight to pair our gospel reading with that wonderful reading from Ezekiel. Those two passages work so well together and, essentially deliver the same message. But I’ll say more about that in a few minutes. First, I want to make a few observations about our gospel reading.

Honestly, there’s a lot to like in the story of the raising of Lazarus. But there’s also a lot that’s just odd. Let me give you a few examples.

While the other three gospels use the Cleansing of the Temple (*i.e.*, when Jesus overturned the moneychanger’s tables, and chased out the animal vendors) as the event which sets into motion the religious leader’s plans to have Jesus arrested and tried, John goes in a different direction and uses the raising of Lazarus as that pivotal event. And I’m really not sure why he does that.

Also, when Mary is introduced in our gospel, the author notes that she “was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair.” But that’s not going to happen until the next chapter. Usually, the gospel writers are very meticulous about the progression of events. So, it’s very out of character for John to reference something, which hasn’t yet taken place, and to refer to it as if it was something that had already taken place.

Finally, it's strange, and in a story that is as important as this one is for John, that the main character, Lazarus, utters not a single word. And on top of that, his character is never really fleshed out to any significant degree. All we know about Lazarus is that Jesus loved him, and that he got sick and died.

I could go on, but you get my point: it's a wonderful story but, at the same time, it's a strange story. Now, I want to talk about the parallels between our gospel and our first reading, so let's briefly revisit the story from Ezekiel.

One day, God gives the prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley of bones. And then, God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to those bones, and Ezekiel did as he had been told. Suddenly, the bones begin to come together, flesh and sinew appear, and what had once been a valley of bones is now into a valley of human bodies. But there is no breath in those bodies, no life, so God ordered Ezekiel to prophesy again. After that, breath did indeed enter those bodies, and they lived.

And then, God explained this vision to Ezekiel: the bones represent people who believe they are without hope, and completely cut off. And to those people, God says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves ... Then you shall know that I, the Lord," speak and act.

It's a great story! And what makes this story work so well with our gospel, are two bits of information that are contained in our gospel, but which aren't obvious from our reading.

The first bit of information is the fact that the name "Lazarus" is a short form of the name "Eleazar," which, in Hebrew, means "God helps." And the second bit of information is the fact that Lazarus lives in the town of Bethany, and the name "Bethany" means "House of Affliction." Since most of us don't understand Hebrew, we can be forgiven for not picking up on that. But the first-century readers of this gospel almost certainly would have realized that when you put Lazarus and Bethany together in the same story, the message is clear: God helps those who are afflicted. And that is the very thing that God said to Ezekiel, when God explained the vision. Eureka!

However, when I shared this revelation with Peggy, she wasn't all that impressed. And when I thought about it, I guess I wasn't all that impressed either. I guess the message that God helps those in need isn't all that new, so I had to think some more about the connection between these two stories. What could it be?

Well, certainly, both of these readings talk about people who are without hope. The people in the first reading have been metaphorically reduced to a valley of bones ... they have no hope that God can or will do anything for them. That is, until the prophet speaks. But even after the bones have been reconstituted into bodies, it requires another intervention by the prophet for the deed to be completed.

And in the gospel reading, Lazarus has been dead four days. In those days, people believed that the spirit lingers with the body of a dead person for three days, before departing. The fourth day was their theological point of no return; no one returns from the grave after three days. There was no hope for Lazarus; that is, not until Jesus speaks and Lazarus emerges from the tomb. But for Lazarus, the deed isn't complete; he's still bound by his grave clothes, until Jesus gives the order for someone to unbind him and set him free.

The parallels between these two stories are remarkable. So, what does all this tell us? I thought I had stumbled across the answer when I read one New Testament scholar who described how she had an epiphany while studying this story. One day she suddenly realized that "Lazarus is us!" and that the point of this story is to assure us that, when we are afflicted and without hope, God calls us forth from our situation and renews us. I confess that I was disappointed reading her words, because I already had that epiphany and, while I agreed with her, I also thought there had to be more to it than simple "Lazarus is us!"

So I read some more, and this time from my favorite New Testament theologian, Robert Farrar Capon. Capon expressed his belief that the story of the raising of Lazarus, though it reads like a simple historical narrative, is actually a parable; an enacted parable. And he's not alone in thinking this. And that bit of information opens up lots of possibilities, because in a parable, the assignment of characters — you know, who is supposed to be who in the story — becomes a lot more fluid.

So, yes, sometimes the character of Lazarus is meant to represent us. But at other times the Jesus character is meant to represent us. And at still other times, the unnamed person who unbound Lazarus and set him free is meant to represent us. In fact, I believe that, at different times, we play different one of those characters. But — and this is where the proverbial rubber meets the road — in a community such as ours, there is always someone present who is Lazarus; there is always someone present who is Jesus; and there is always someone present who is that unnamed person who unbinds and frees. Alright, how does this actually play out in a place like St. Luke's?

Actually, it plays out rather naturally, and without anyone really giving it much thought. For example, it's been my observation that there is always someone at St. Luke's who is the Lazarus character: they're in a situation, they're afflicted in some way, and maybe they've been that way for long enough to feel that there is no hope. Fortunately for that person, there is also always someone here at St. Luke's who is playing the Jesus role: they're the person who brings a word of encouragement, or a word of hope, or a word of direction. And then, finally, there is also always someone here who plays the role of that unnamed person who unbinds Lazarus and frees him: and this person, for lack of a better term, is the facilitator; this person, and often without bringing a lot of attention to themselves, and just as often without knowing what they're doing, just doing whatever else needs to be done for our Lazarus character.

All of a sudden, there's a whole lot more to this gospel reading than simply a narrative about a person who was raised from the dead. What John has presented to us is a type of divine drama about what is always going on in places like St. Luke's. And what's more, I believe it is also a commentary on the importance of Christians gathering together regularly.

Now, I've talked to a lot of people who are Christians, but who have never darkened the door of their local parish. And they usually tell me something like this:

"I get up every day before dawn, and I sit on my back porch with a cup of coffee, and I watch the sun rise. That's my time with God."

Or,

"When I feel the need, I go out on a quiet lake in a boat, with a fishing pole in my hands. And in that time between casting out and reeling in, God and I hash out quite a bit."

Or,

"When I need some face-time with God, I put on my good boots, I grab my walking stick, and I take a long hike in the woods. You'd be surprised how much gets sorted out in those times."

Okay. First of all, let me say this: I get it. I really do. I've watched the sun rise, and I've been fishing, and I've taken long hikes. And, yes, there's a lot to be said for

doing those sorts of things. And, yes, God *is* out there, and you *can* talk to him in those places. But consider, for a moment, what you're missing.

What happens if, one day in your life, you're the Lazarus character? Who's going to be the Jesus character for you? Who's going to be that unnamed unbinder for you? Who can help you — to whom can you turn — when you're playing the Lone Ranger?

Or, what happens, if all you do is play the character of the Lone Ranger? Think about all of the opportunities, all of those situations, think about all of those Lazaruses for whom you could have been the Jesus character, or the unnamed unbinding character. Think about all of those opportunities where you could have brought your unique abilities and talents and insights to bear, but didn't. Those could have been times when, not only could you have offered tangible help to others, but you yourself would have grown, in the process, more and more into the image and likeness of God. But you didn't. What a waste!

And so, I return to my earlier assertion that this story — this parable — about the raising of Lazarus, is actually a story that affirms the importance of the community for the individual. This community is important for each and every person who is a part of it, whether you know it or not.

Finally, I believe we can, at last, bring a fuller understanding to the words of Martha and Mary, who, each, said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I believe that the story of the raising of Lazarus stands as a reminder that Jesus, in fact, is *always* here — that he is always with us — in you, and me, and in the person sitting next to you.

Amen, and amen.