

Lessons from Lazarus. A sermon preached as part of a series on Jesus' healings at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC April 22, 2018 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lesson: JOHN 11:1-44

There is so much in play in this morning's reading from John 11.

There is grief,

There is questioning, anger, disappointment, tears,
Questions about delay and timing

Cross purpose conversations

Resignation

Perhaps one of Jesus most profound I AM'S – all surrounding a little family known intimately by Jesus

And there is a healing-a resuscitation some might term it.

A forerunner of Jesus' own resurrection some scholars claim.

Perhaps?

There is among that crowd – and here we need to read beyond vs 44 – the religious leaders or their lackies – forever watching and listening to Jesus – just waiting for him to say the 'wrong' thing or to call into question pharisaic tradition or law!

This day in the life of Jesus is recorded by John and John alone!

I wonder was John just close by listening.

Or did he pull Martha aside and grill her about the conversation she had with Jesus

I wonder – were there others who had gone out with Martha and overheard what was said between Jesus and her.

The story recounted in John 11 is obviously told by someone who knew and loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary,

And one who picks up on little personal details.

We are not told much about Lazarus

He is very ill as the drama opens

It is Sister Martha and to a lesser extent

contemplative Mary who dominate this first part of John 11.

Nor does the text really go into a detailed explanation as to why Jesus stayed where he was and did not immediately rush to his friend's bedside as we might do if in a similar situation with a friend of ours.

Perhaps when told the news, Martha and Mary hoped at least for Jesus' prayers.

Again, when we are told a close friend is ill, there is an expectation at least of prayer is there not?

Yet Jesus does not go immediately.

He replies to his disciples

About the illness not leading to death,

Rather, it is for God's glory that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Uh huh!!!

Maybe Jesus did not go because he had not yet received his marching orders from the Father. Certainly as we read the conversation between Jesus and first the disciples and then Martha – it is clear that Jesus knew more about the situation than either the disciples and Martha – vs.7-16

In this morning's reading, John has also given us another glimpse of Thomas.

What a negative Ned he is – when informed that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, Thomas – **Let us go also that we might die with him) vs 16)**

The reading ends with Lazarus walking hesitantly and stiffly from the tomb – for he is tightly wrapped with strips of cloth, His face is also wrapped in cloth – he's dead – these are burial garments

Lazarus come out

Unbind him and let him go says Jesus.

The whole event would certainly be a subject for table and street corner talk in the village for a long, long time

It would be a game changer for Martha, Mary and most certainly Lazarus

Strangely John does not record the reaction of the disciples.

But the story is nevertheless significant in Jesus' ministry according to John – for he devotes a lot of copy to it.

Now, this is not a conventional healing by Jesus story.

I have never witnessed a resurrection of person declared dead,

Though I must share with you a story about a lady for whom I was asked to pray many years ago.

I happened to be visiting in the hospital one afternoon and the sister of the lady in question stopped me –“Mr. Hilder, please come and pray for Buff –she needs to be healed.”

Whatever self-confidence mixed with hubris I had disappeared when I entered Buff's room.

Buff was hooked up to a variety of medical machines, breathing through a mask and had intravenous tubes in many places.

“Buff has to make her annual trip west this year – she's always done it – driving her camper van across the country”

Hesitantly I asked the sister, what was wrong with Buff – though my eyes told me – plenty!!

“She has double pneumonia and congestive heart failure.

She is 87 you know”

God really does have a way of humbling each of us.

I do not to this day remember the specific words I prayed except I do remember praying for God's healing touch upon Buff.

Three weeks later, I met the sister in the local grocery store.

She ran up to me – “Mr. Hilder, **YOU** healed Buff!!”

“Excuse me”

“You healed Buff” – want to have a crowd gather, local grocery store in a small community and a zealous individual making such a declaratory statement.

“Buff is going west on her road trip next week! You healed her Mr. Hilder.”

“No “I responded – “GOD healed Buff”

“Same thing Mr. Hilder”

– “No I prayed, God healed....”

To come back to this mornings' story in John 11 – it is not a regular healing by Jesus story, but it does remind us of important truths and realities – as do all the healing stories of scripture.

Lesson from Lazarus: *It is a story that is up front and honest about the reality of grief in the face of loss.*

Where did the idea of grief being only an emotion for the weak or the unfaithful arise?

All and any loss in this life results in grief. In this instance in chapter 11, the loss is one caused by death

But I don't think grief in our lives is limited to loss by death.

I think grief occurs every time there is a major change in our lives – even if that change is a “good change”.

Leaving a familiar neighborhood and a group of friends for a new job or work

Leaving a familiar work or job

When a family member leaves the home for a first time,

When family members either themselves decide or it is decided for them to go into some type of care facility.

All sort of change can result in grief.

Well, grief runs through this story in chapter 11

Nowhere does Jesus ignore its manifestations

He is all too aware of the raw emotions – first with Martha, then Mary

As well, Jesus listens to the emotions of his disciples – even Eeyore Thomas

Then too John records Jesus emotions when faced with the undeniable reality of Lazarus's death

Jesus began to weep – or from the version with which I grew up **Jesus wept**

Take that in for a moment – Jesus began to weep.

Then in verse 38, John describes Jesus as being **greatly disturbed**.

A distant person might not weep or be greatly disturbed – Jesus is both and Jesus we know to be the Son of God.

If Jesus wept and was greatly disturbed by his friend Lazarus' death – *then who are any of us to believe that crying, tears, sighs, being disturbed, questioning, perhaps lamenting or even ranting about life's unfairness is abnormal.*

Ever had someone say to you – well, time to get over your loss

Just buck up and do it for Jesus.

Lesson from Lazarus: *Grief cannot be fast-tracked – not without personal cost.*

Those who have extensive experience in counselling and working with the grieving say that though there may well be identifiable stages in grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance,

There is not a fixed time for each stage.

As well, these stages were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages

They are general descriptions of responses to loss that many people have,

But remember there is not a typical response to loss, because there is no typical loss!

Not everyone goes through all of them in a prescribed order.

In so many ways, grief is as unique as any of us are!

Lesson from Lazarus: *Being present with the grieving is perhaps the most invaluable thing we can do.* Watch what Jesus does as well as what he does not do.

Jesus does not apologize for weeping or being disturbed in the light of his friend Lazarus' death. He is not disturbed or distracted by the emotions or comments by either Martha or Mary.

He does not preach to Martha and Mary. Grieving people do not need to be surrounded by empty chatter or platitudes.

In such times, silence really is golden!

Often people are not really looking for answers – they just want to know that others are there with them.

Lesson from Lazarus – *every believer is called and challenged to live in the light of one of the boldest of Jesus' I AM claims.*

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

I believe this is a claim that we understand more clearly and hold onto more tenaciously the older we get.

When we are young, most of us think we are going to live forever.

That is not insensitivity – it is just the way we are wired when we are young.

So this claim in particular that speaks about resurrection, life, death may not hit us in the same way it does when we realize our own mortality, The shortness of life in general in compared to the eternity with God spoken about in scripture.

I was 22 when I heard this I AM with the eyes of one who realized that life was indeed very short and unpredictable.

I was standing on a windy rise in the Hamilton Ontario cemetery as pall bearer for my beloved mentor Ross Adams, who had died of an aggressive form of cancer within a year after retirement from full time parish work.

It was not the first time I had felt grief over the death of a friend or family,

But it was the first time I was profoundly struck by the implications and the hope of this particular I AM of Jesus.

Hope for the here and now
And hope for the “someday”

As God’s people we live in the aftermath of Easter – yes?

As this is the case, the Resurrection of Jesus – the power of God prevails – *there is therefore no wall or barrier that the presence of the Risen Christ CANNOT penetrate and dissolve!*

THAT IS INCREDIBLY HOPEFUL IN THE HEAR
AND NOW.

How so?

You may believe a wall between you and God exists because you believe God could never love you owing to what you have done or allowed to have happen in your life

You may believe a wall between you and a family member can never cease to exist because of something you said or did not say, did or did not do

You may believe that the default position in this life between you and another must always be one of vengeance, unforgiveness, and mistrust

You may believe that there is a wall between you and your child or children.

You may believe there is a solid wall between you and your parents, because they just don't get it and refuse to try to understand your viewpoint.

You may believe there is a wall between you and co-workers or friends owing to the way you may have been treated by them.

We could go on and on and list all the walls
For the walls are real....

But because Jesus is the resurrection and the life all these walls need not be permanent or insurmountable.

To paraphrase President Reagan's comment to President Gorbachev when the Berlin Wall came down!

Lord Jesus by the power of your resurrection,, tear down that wall, those walls in my life that prevent me from living as you would have me live – abundantly!

I have seen so many walls come down in my own life,
In the lives of others – possible only by the healing touch of the risen Lord – that heavenly touch for earthly pain!

That's the hope I absorb from the I AM of John 11 for the here and now

But there is also hope for the someday.....
Or 'when the time comes'
I firmly believe that Jesus can and does heal today – and we must be prepared for the unexpected.
I firmly believe that as God's people we have a responsibility to pray for healing – our own and others.
Remembering that God is the Healer.
I firmly believe God wants us to be healed, even if that means dying well.

Healing is not always miracle cure or perpetual good health.

ULTIMATE healing for the Christian is death and resurrection with Jesus.

Health is being at peace with God and at peace with yourself.

Healing in Scripture does not refer to becoming as you were;

It is becoming what you should be.

We are primarily spiritual beings, secondary physical – which just the opposite of the way the world sees humanity!

And the primary healing we need is spiritual

Jesus' promise and affirmation here in John 11 assures us that the end of this life as we know it does not mean we move into an empty void.

Rather, it means resurrection with Jesus.

And among other things that echoes that tag line 'the best is yet to come'.

None of us as God's people are called to be so preoccupied with that reality that we miss the wonder and awe of each day God gives us.

The ways we see God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, healing touch

But this particular I AM and our holding to its promise allow us to remember with confidence and assurance that 'when the day comes', we shall not be abandoned or left alone.

Thanks be to God for such a promise and reassuring words.