

sermon-11/1/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“All Saints Day Meditation”  
John 11:32-44

Reading about Lazarus, all wrapped up like a mummy walking out of the tomb makes this a perfect scripture for the Halloween weekend! All kidding aside, this is a fun and powerful scripture passage for any weekend.

Like last week’s scripture passage in Job, we enter this text toward the culmination of the Lazarus story which began at the beginning of chapter eleven. Apparently Lazarus was one of Jesus’ closest friends. The scriptures mention twice that Jesus loved him. It is fun to know Jesus had a good buddy outside the twelve disciples. It reminds us there was more to Jesus’ life than we have in the gospels.

One day Jesus is called to come to Bethany, near Jerusalem, because Lazarus is deathly sick. Surprisingly, Jesus waits a couple of days before he goes. Perhaps he hesitated because it would mean heading into the territory of his biggest detractors. It could be dangerous to be that close to Jerusalem. It could also be the gospel writer’s way of saying Jesus never seemed to be driven by what his contemporaries considered urgent. He always seemed to act according to God’s leading, God’s timing, and not human pleading.

When Jesus finally does go to Bethany, Lazarus is dead. First he is met by Lazarus’ sister, Martha. She, in essence, blames Jesus for her brother’s death. If he had only come, maybe he could have saved him.

Jesus responds to Martha with those famous words, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Then Lazarus’ other sister, Mary, enters the picture. It is here where our scripture passage for today picks up the story.

Mary, too, blames Jesus for her brother’s death, but she also cries. Instead of Jesus repeating what he said to Martha, Jesus cries. It is one of the most human pictures of Jesus in all the New Testament. He is heartbroken over the death of his close friend.

Next thing we know Jesus is calling Lazarus out of the tomb. We know Lazarus is dead and not just in a coma because he has been bound in cloth for four days and sealed in the cave. Martha worries there might be a stench after so many days. The KJV of this passage puts it plainly. Martha simply says, “Lord. . .he stinketh.”

But Lazarus does come out and he is alive again. What immediately follows this resuscitation of Lazarus is important to note. The Pharisees and Chief Priests plot to kill Jesus because so many of the people are now following him after this amazing sign. As one commentator put it, Lazarus coming out of the tomb meant that Jesus would eventually need to enter the tomb after being killed by his enemies.

There you have it. This is the scripture given to us for All Saints' Sunday. This is also the Sunday where I am supposed to preach my big stewardship sermon for season's stewardship campaign. That is a lot of freight for this passage to carry!

My focus is going to be on the image of Lazarus coming out of the tomb bound in a death shroud. It is a vivid picture. It is, as some have remarked, a picture of the human predicament, at least the human predicament without the hope we have from God. Fred Craddock put it this way, "Apart from trust in God, the world is a cemetery."

I realize that sounds pretty melodramatic, but there is an important truth about that statement. While none of us have died, on some deep inner level, most of us know what it is like to be bound by less ultimate little deaths.

I am referring to things like fear, obsessing about our health or weight, suffering from broken or dysfunctional relationships, disappointments at work, realizing we are never going to accomplish all we had hoped when we began our careers, struggling to overcome bad habits, and even being consumed by this culture's consumerism that holds many of us in its death grip.

Our great hope is that we will hear Jesus' life-giving word calling us to come out of the tomb those realities create. We long to hear those words Lazarus heard, "Unbind him and let him go," let him go home, let him go free.

On All Saints' Sunday it is very appropriate to think about all those saints in our lives who have spoken words of freedom to us. Who has freed you from all that binds you in a death grip? Who has helped you begin to unwind all those realities in your life that have caused your life to stink?

For me, it has been both the famous saints of the past and the anonymous saints in some of the churches I have served. People like St. Francis who gave everything away and lived simply have deeply marked my inner life. When I listen to their voices I find freedom from the consumerism that especially holds this culture in its death grip. I find I want to give money away as an act of freedom and rebellion against that powerful force of death.

It has also been countless other church folks who have faced their death with grace and trust that have freed me from some of the fear of death that plagues most of us. Their trusting example in difficult times has slowly unbound the death shroud fear can wrap around me.

As you take communion this Sunday, I encourage you to remember and give thanks for all those saints who have spoken Christ's words of freedom to you. May your remembering those saints and giving thanks for their words and example inform your living in these days. May it inform your giving. May it inspire you to live and give in such a way you will be one of those saints for the next generation of Newport members as we head into the next fifty years of this church's history. Amen