

Signs of Unimaginable Life

A sermon on John 11:1-45; Romans 8:6-11 & Ezekiel 37:1-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 March 2020

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Message

Jesus leads the way towards a new experience of life that is so utterly alive that death is powerless to threaten, limit or constrain it.

Sermon

A quick survey: how many of you think you are never going to die?

How many of you give much thought to how to prepare yourselves for your own death?

And how many of you would rather I didn't ask questions like that?!

This season of Lent wants to lead us into freedom and joy and life, but it does so by first leading us to confront our own fragility and mortality. We intentionally remind ourselves that we are going to die, and this year with much of the world living in under the shadow of a potentially fatal virus, that a more confronting dose of reality than usual.

On Ash Wednesday (when we could still touch each other), we drew the sign of Jesus's death on one another's foreheads in ash and used words that allude to the committal rite at our funerals to remind each other that "from dust you came and to dust you shall return. May the Lord give you life."

Today all three of our Bible readings talk about death and life, and that's not because I chose them to suit the times – I've returned to following the ecumenical cycle of readings for now. So let's reflect on where this annual glimpse of impending death might be inviting us to go. Because, as I have reflected on it in light of these readings, I have realised that the purpose of our Lenten confrontation with mortality is a different thing from what we are usually thinking about when we talk about our own mortality.

In the secret men's business that takes place when a boy turns thirteen in this congregation, one of the things the adult men do is starkly confront the young man with the news that he is going to die. Young men need to be made aware of their vulnerability and mortality, because young men who think they are the centre of the universe and that they are invincible and immortal are a serious danger to the world, as well as to themselves. So that is all about learning our limits and how to live responsibly within them. That's no bad thing, but I think the Lenten journey is quite different; more about facing our death-imposed limits and discovering how Jesus offers to break us free of them.

In the story we heard about the death and resuscitation of Lazarus, there are several things that the Apostle John describes that seem so odd and out of place that even some of our best English translations have simply changed them to try to make sense of them. In the *New Revised Standard Version*, which is the one I mostly use, it describes what happens when Jesus first got news from Martha that Lazarus was ill, and it says "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." In the original language, it doesn't say "though he loved them". It quite plainly says, "because he loved them". But it doesn't seem to make sense to say that because

Jesus loved them, he ignored their plea for a few days, so the translators have changed the word to something that seemed to make more sense. But I wonder ...

And then later, the same version says, “When Jesus saw (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” As any compassionate person might be. But the original language doesn’t say he was deeply moved; it actually says he was angry and agitated, which is an awful lot harder to explain. Unless ...

Well, unless there is a lot more going on here than just a compassionate visit to grieving friends. Which there undoubtedly is. John’s gospel has fewer miracle stories than the other gospels, and the seven it has are all referred to not as miracles, but as ‘signs’. Signs, because their importance is not in the details of what happened, even if it is as dramatic as a dead man being raised back to life, but in what they are pointing to.

These events are signs of something else, something bigger that is going on or that is coming soon. So while Jesus delaying because he loved them, and being angry and agitated in the midst of it all might not make much sense if we are just looking at this story as an account of him helping out a friend, they may begin to have meaning when we look at the bigger picture of the sign that was taking place and the things it is pointing to.

John’s account of the story of Jesus is told quite differently from the other three gospel accounts. John has a very different style. He tells fewer stories, but he tells them in more detail and includes a lot more dialogue and a lot more interpretative comments. In some ways, this story of the raising of Lazarus has a similar place in John’s account to the Garden of Gethsemane story in the other gospels. If you know that story, you will know that it is the point where Jesus becomes most painfully aware that he has now gone too far to turn back and that his fate is now sealed. He knows that he will be brutally killed within days, and in the garden he prays an agonised prayer asking God whether there really isn’t any other way than to go through with it. In John’s gospel, it is the raising of Lazarus that seals Jesus’s fate, and he seems to know that it will.

Let me pick up the story immediately where our earlier reading left off. The very next verses are one’s we heard last Sunday:

Some people went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” ... So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

No wonder Jesus was angry and agitated as he wrestled with the conflict between his desire to give life back to his friend and the knowledge that it would cost him his own life at the hands of a jealous and defensive religious leadership if he did. And no wonder, given his love for his friends and the fact that, as we are later told, this also resulted in a plot to re-kill Lazarus, that Jesus held back for a couple of days, probably prayerfully weighing up whether this was really the right thing to do or whether perhaps it wouldn’t be better for everyone if he just left

Lazarus to rest in peace. “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. But if there be no other way than that I drink it, your will be done.”

While in the pragmatic sequence of events, the raising of Lazarus sets in motion the events that lead directly to the death of Jesus, as a sign the raising of Lazarus points not so much to death, but to resurrection life that breaks the grip of death. It points in the same direction as Ezekiel’s sign in the valley of dry bones. Death is no match for the power of God’s contagious aliveness.

As the Apostle Paul put it in our second reading, the One “who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” That’s not quite the sombre and sobering consideration of our mortality that we might have been imagining on Ash Wednesday. The One “who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies.”

The most important thing about this sign for us, though, is to recognise that it is not all about the future and whether we will die and live again in the future. It may be about that too, but it is firstly and much more importantly about whether we are truly alive or in the grip of death today.

The fact that we are an extraordinarily death-denying culture does not really conceal the fact that the lives of most of us are hugely overshadowed and constrained by anxiety about death. We delude ourselves that by not thinking about death and distancing ourselves from any contact with death, we can somehow stay free of it. But the truth is that things that are repressed and denied not only don’t go away, but they are thereby left unhindered deep inside us to haunt our hearts and minds as they wish.

So for most of us, much of what we do is done without confidence or freedom because, without really realising it, we are cowering before the menacing figure of death who taunts us with the idea that everything we do is for nothing, because there is nothing but death in the end and the end could come at any time. As much as we’d like to, we struggle to believe anything other than that everything is fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow, and that all there is to life is whatever happens in whatever time we’ve got left. Whatever we do and whatever we are, it is all going to be turned to nothing in the blink of an eye.

And at one level, you might think that that could lead to a less inhibited approach to life, to a sort of you-only-live-once, make the most of it and live it to the full, kind of abandon, and for some people it does. But for most people, it is unconsciously constricting and just drains the joy out of much of what they do.

So one of the reasons that we deliberately work at confronting our own mortality, at contemplating our own death – not so difficult this year – is to bring these fears that control us so much into the light so that we can examine them and challenge them. If we can acknowledge them, and even befriend them, and come to terms with the reality of our own mortality, maybe we can be freed up for that more liberated approach. Perhaps we can see something of that in Jesus, as he confronts the certainty of his own impending death, and overcomes the fear to act courageously and freely and lovingly despite it.

But actually, Jesus is pointing to something more than whether we will have life on the other side of death. He is calling us to share in God's radical aliveness now, a life-force that is so vigorous and unquenchable that it renders death quite powerless.

I don't mean that it means anyone won't die. This Lazarus story would quickly give the lie to any of that sort of rubbish, because not only will Lazarus die again, but lifting him back to life this time will bring down death on the head of Jesus, and quite quickly. And nor does it mean that facing death no longer provokes any fear, because again, Jesus's anger and agitation show how hard even he was finding it to face both the death of a friend and the path of death that he was now facing himself.

What I mean is that the life of God is so utterly alive, that even being dead cannot quench it. Lazarus is temporarily brought back from death, only to face it again at some later date, but with Jesus's resurrection, it is quite different. He is not so much brought back from death, but raised up to life, even though he is dead. Jesus has been killed, and he remains killed, but that can't stop him from being mind-bogglingly alive, more alive than ever. And I'm not spiritualising away the resurrection. Jesus has been raised to life, crucified body and all, because God's aliveness is so overwhelmingly alive that death can do its worst and still find itself entirely impotent.

So what Jesus is beckoning us towards is the invitation to join him in this extraordinary aliveness, not just in some future time, but starting now. As the prophet Ezekiel and the Apostle Paul both said, and as Jesus signals as he draws Lazarus back towards life, when we stop breathing in the stale fearful spirit of the death-denying but death constricted world around us and allow the Spirit of the living God to be breathed into us instead and we begin growing into that aliveness, we will be increasingly set free to live expansively and abundantly and generously and full of the love and mercy we have known in the risen crucified one.

For Jesus, and in Jesus, life is so huge that even being killed will leave nothing but a flesh wound, and Jesus still has those wounds, but is still powerfully alive. Tonight, he stands amidst us, along side each one of us, the risen crucified one reaching out a scarred hand towards us, calling us to face our own mortality but to come forth from our tombs and be unbound, drawing us into his own astonishing, unimaginable, irrepressible, and wonderfully contagious aliveness. Thanks be to God!