

Sermon: April 2, 2017 – John 11: 1-45 (Lent 5)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

The words “Lent” and “Journey” are two words that tend to travel together.

If I were to picture this year’s season of Lent as a journey, I would picture it as a hike that starts in really dense forest, then as you ascend, things gradually open up: more light, and occasional clearings where you get to see the big picture. The trail does get steeper as we get closer to Holy Week, and the part we’re on right now has some switchbacks... but even with those challenges, it’s a journey of beauty, and growing light, and wonder, as our bodies, minds and spirits experience the beauty of this spiritual landscape.

That image of physically walking our way through Lent becomes particularly important today with the story of Lazarus. I only came to realize this a couple of days ago, when my favourite practical Greek scholar, a Presbyterian minister named Rev. Mark Davis, opened my eyes to the geography of this reading from the 11th chapter of John. Amidst all of the details of this lengthy chapter, I had not paid nearly enough attention to the perilous nature of where Jesus and the disciples were actually walking. You could say I didn’t see the forest, for all the trees.

As Jesus has been walking through John’s narrative, he has been bringing the light of eternal truth to all manner of people along the way. First Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes by night seeking additional wisdom from Jesus. While this might not have been too dangerous for Jesus, Nicodemus would have questions to answer had he been seen. Then Jesus passes through Samaritan territory, encounters a woman at a well and talks to her and cares for the realities of her life. In this encounter, Jesus does a bunch of things you would never do in that time and place, staring down social convention and stepping over prejudices toward women and Samaritans. Then, last week we heard of Jesus physically opening the eyes of a blind man, bringing light to a life where there had been nothing but darkness, and by now his opponents are fully against him. Nobody but the devil himself, they argue, could cast out the evil powers that had caused this man to be blind. And it is here, that I first missed the geography.

We’re not told precisely where Jesus healed the man born blind, but he directed the man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam which we can assume was close by. This pool was just outside the walls of old Jerusalem. Following this, there is a dispute among the religious leaders of Jerusalem who first of all cast the formerly-blind man out of the synagogue, then turn their scorn toward Jesus. Jesus, being Jesus, does not back down from their challenge but meets them head-on, upping the ante by saying this: (John 10: 27-30) “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all... and the Father and I are one.”

And what, pray tell, was the reaction of the Judeans of Jerusalem to this inflammatory statement? They picked up rocks, with the intention of stoning this heretic (John 10:31). After a bit more shouting back and forth, the mob tried to have him arrested - but Jesus escaped their grasp. (John 10:39)

At this point, Jesus and his disciples got the heck out of Jerusalem, crossed the Jordan “to the place where John at first baptized” (John 10:40) and the people flocked to him. Keeping up our tour of the Holy Lands, we can place this location as “Aenon, near Salim” up by Galilee. (John 3:23) But keep in mind, Jesus went to this place, not just to be someplace different or because he liked it up north; he was literally driven out of Jerusalem, barely escaping with his life.

And it is at this point, that his dear friend Lazarus takes ill.

Let’s cut the action of Jesus’ journey at that point, and take a wee sojourn into our own life’s journeys.

Many of us – perhaps most of us – have had the experience of a seriously-ill relative who is far away, and the gut-wrenching decision: do I stay here, do I go there, and if I do go, when do I go? And if I was just there, and perhaps even said my goodbyes, do I go again? For those of us whose choice to live in this intensely beautiful part of the world, has also involved saying goodbye to our extended family, this is all-too-familiar a dynamic. Practicality says one thing, our emotions say something else, and at some point the cost of travel and accommodations factor in as well. It’s a hard decision, and hard to know if you’ve made the right choice.

Take that tough experience, and add to it the potential of walking right into an angry mob who have basically said, “we’ll kill you if you ever come back here” and you basically have the space that Jesus was in. Lazarus took a sudden turn for the worse, back in the town of Bethany, a mere two miles from the smouldering hatred of Jerusalem.

One of the aspects of this story of Jesus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha that has always troubled me is the delay in Jesus’ return. It seemed that the sisters were pretty upset about the delay as well. But if we think of it geographically, when Jesus was driven out of Jerusalem he went a long way from there because he needed to get safe. And when the news of Lazarus’ illness came to him – news that would have taken several days to reach him, as the cell phone coverage would have been pretty poor in that part of the Holy Land 2000 years ago - he couldn’t just hop on the next bus or catch a private plane out of Capernaum. All of this would take time, and even if he hustled, chances of getting to Bethany before Lazarus expired would have been slim.

But more than that: to go back to Bethany was to walk directly into danger. The same Judeans that wanted him dead, were the circle of friends and neighbours who were presently attending to Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Yet faced with this decision between going back into an environment where he was reviled, or staying at a safe distance, Jesus went right back into the middle of it.

And again, we cut the action of Jesus’ journey for a moment, and step into our journey.

In my Christian upbringing, the courage of Jesus as he approached his crucifixion was a major point of faith – and, to be honest, that still counts for a lot in my faith life. But what I perhaps have underestimated, was the constant threat he was under in any given situation. When you are saying and doing things that are that contrary to the accepted ways of being, the possibility of some zealot cracking you over the head with a large stone or axe-handle is pretty significant.

And yet, Jesus kept putting himself in harm’s way for the sake of others. He kept wading in to dangerous waters because someone needed rescuing. And if we are, indeed, the body of Christ in this world, that is part of our spiritual DNA as well.

There is, inherently, an element of risk in being the body of Christ. I’m talking about actually following his radical path of love, actually putting the needs of the poor and marginalized ahead of my own comfort, actually giving words and actions to my support of the environment, and equal pay for women’s work, and safe space for LGBTQ members of our community. When we actually do these things there will be people who aren’t happy about it, and some of the people we anger will be people we like and respect. But if we are Christ’s disciples in our place, or if we go one level deeper and accept the mantle of being the enduring voice of Christ in our time, we can take some inspiration from stories like this one, where Jesus did go back to Bethany in spite of the risks, because of his love for Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus.

It would be hard to overstate how significant Jesus’ connection was with this household. We can assume that Jesus was pretty close to his disciples, with the amount of time they spent together and the amount that they had all sacrificed for this common mission, but there are only two people that Jesus is described as having “brotherly love” for in John’s gospel: the unnamed “beloved disciple” who is referred to six times in the gospel, who was beside Jesus at the Last Supper and at his crucifixion, and is understood to be the author of the gospel; and Lazarus. (and just as an aside, this week my colleague Rev. Murray Speer reminded me of the significant school of thought that think the beloved disciple and Lazarus the beloved are one and the same – that perhaps the first-hand accounts of Lazarus are the basis of this gospel, but I will just leave that one to percolate with you for a while). In the gospel of John, no friend but Lazarus is referred to with such specific endearment.

I picture the home of these adult siblings, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, as the safe place where Jesus could go and recover. This was the place where he could relax and be himself. This was where he could be pampered, and joke around, maybe even fix things around the house. These were people he could talk to, share with, a place removed from the intensity of his relationship with the disciples. And when Lazarus, his truest friend, had died, Jesus wept.

And once more, we pause to reflect on our own responses to life. Bishop T. Garrett Benjamin, Minister Emeritus at Light of the World Christian Church in Indianapolis, said twenty years ago that if we truly want

to discern our personal mission in life, or our mission as a congregation in Christ, we do well “to follow the tracks of our tears.” Those things that move us to tears, are the things that claim us for action. The shortest verse in all of scripture, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35) reminds us that our Christian journey is not just a journey of our thoughts and beliefs; the steps of following Jesus take us to those places that matter most.

When I approach the long, rambling story of Lazarus as a story with motion– the motion of travelling from afar to get there, the motion of leaving the safety of the land on the other side of the Jordan to re-enter Jerusalem’s opposition and danger, the motion from a place where things were going great to a place of death and sorrow – it makes sense in a new way. All of a sudden, Martha’s rushing out to meet Jesus is not just an act of grief, but an act of intercepting him before entering a house full of her Judean friends and neighbours, all of whom hated his guts. Thomas’s bizarre statement (John 11:16), “let’s all go and die with him” is lifted from being something ridiculous and even sadistic, to a statement of profound faith: knowing that Jesus was heading toward a crowd that wanted him dead, we can assume Thomas was talking about dying with Jesus, not dying with Lazarus, stating that anyone claiming to be a disciple of Christ must also be willing to go, in love, into life’s most difficult places. And if, for a moment, we entertain the idea that Lazarus and not John might be the beloved eye-witness writing the accounts that turned into this gospel, we can make new sense of Jesus’ statement (John 11:4) that Lazarus’ agony happened so that glory can be revealed: while that statement sounds off-kilter coming from anyone else, Lazarus knew first-hand how powerful it was to be risen from death to new life by Jesus – as any of us who have experienced a new start in Jesus can attest to.

Once we reach the end of this eleventh chapter, we’ve just barely passed the mid-way point of this 21-chapter gospel, but from this point on the topography changes. Starting at the last supper, in chapter 12, the rest of this gospel’s narrative is hurtling headlong toward Jesus’ crucifixion. Continuing with our opening analogy, John is kind of “all downhill” from here, at least until Jesus’ stone is rolled away, just like Lazarus’s had been. So let us stand here at the peak of our journey, and ponder awhile from this vantage point.

We remember what it has been like to watch Jesus bring light and life into the lives of the unlikely: Nicodemus, who thought he knew it all already; the woman at the well, who represents all those groups we are given permission to ignore or treat badly; the man blind from birth, whose transformation and simple declaration of faith ring true; and the household of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, where we see God’s own sorrow intermingled with ours, and the promise of new life enacted.

We remember those times in our lives when the way has not been clear, when journeys have been hard to take but perhaps harder to not take.

We remember our calling as Christ’s hands and feet and heart and voice in this world, as we put ourselves into discomfort and maybe even risk, to be present to the invisible and the voiceless.

We remember Jesus’ tears and ours, letting us know that this journey is not taken only with the feet, but also with the heart.

We remember the summoning of Lazarus from the tomb, a promise that in the voice of Christ our friend and Saviour we hear a call from death to life anew.

As the line becomes blurry between the end of Lent and the start of Holy Week, may the inspiring presence of Jesus Christ, our friend, our brother, our life, guide your journey in paths of joy everlasting. Amen.

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