

Sermon for Sunday, February 22, 2026

John 11:1-53

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today marks the first Sunday in the season of Lent. From one perspective on this day we are completing a sermon series on the signs described by John's gospel as we hear the "grand-daddy" of them all, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. People who study this gospel say that there are seven signs that are described: over the last few weeks we considered four of them:

- Changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana
- Healing of the invalid at the pool of Bethzatha
- Healing of the man born blind
- And today: the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Now that we are officially in the season of Lent, we are beginning a new sermon series that moves us toward Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. These two series overlap with the raising of Lazarus because the raising of Lazarus is the event that forces the religious authorities to take action against Jesus.

The raising of Lazarus has connections or parallels with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Today's sermon will highlight some of those connections.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus live in the village of Bethany. Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem. When Jesus receives word that Lazarus is gravely ill, he and his followers are two days travel from the village. More important Jesus is relatively safe being a long way away from Jerusalem. Returning to Jerusalem means that he is returning to the area where the religious authorities have a stronger sphere of influence. Performing any kind of miracle this close to Jerusalem is risky. Jesus knows this. As the one who is fully divine, he is aware of the danger and eventually goes anyway.

It's never made clear why Jesus delays starting the journey to Bethany. Is it because of the danger? Or is he delaying so that the raising of Lazarus is seen as the miracle that it truly is? (Does he delay because he wants to make sure that Lazarus is truly dead! Ugh! That's an awful thought.) The gospel isn't interested in answering these questions. All we are told is that he waits for two days before departing. He knows that Lazarus is dead because he tells the disciples this. Thomas affirms the danger of moving

toward Jerusalem by saying, "Let us go so that we may die with him."

An intriguing detail is found in verse 2: Mary is the one who later anoints Jesus. This anointing takes place at their home during a dinner party that included Lazarus but occurs a few days later. Why does the author tell us this? The author of John's gospel is placing details in the story so as to connect Lazarus and Jesus. More specifically the gospel writer wants to continue to emphasize that "what happens to Lazarus will happen to Jesus." Certainly Lazarus was anointed before his burial.

When Jesus arrives at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he steps into a space of deep grief. These people are his friends. We are told explicitly that Jesus "loved" these people. It is safe to imagine that he has been to their home and eaten with them several (many?) times. It is at this point, immersed in the grief of the mourners and especially the grief of Mary that Jesus begins to weep. At this moment he grasps/feels the deep sorrow that humans experience when a loved one dies. Now he recognizes within his being the emotional devastation that his followers will experience when he dies. John's gospel is preparing us as well.

Earlier in the gospel the phrase, "Come and see" is used. First when two disciples asked Jesus "where are you staying?" and his response was "Come and see." The second time was when Philip tells Nathanael to "come and see" Jesus. The third time was when the Samaritan woman returned to the village of Sychar and told the villagers about Jesus, asking if he might be the Messiah. When questioned her words were, "Come and see." And here in today's reading Jesus asks, "Where have you laid him?" The response is "Come and see." A good storyteller does this: repeats a phrase that has been used previously to make a point or reinforce it.

Come and see. Jesus, in his humanity, needs the total sensory experience as well as the depth of emotion that death inflicts upon humans. The death of Lazarus provides that for him. And so he goes to the tomb: hearing the grief and the weeping, seeing the rock over the door of the tomb, and smelling the stench of death.

Jesus finds that Lazarus is laid in a tomb that is a cave. The opening to the cave is covered with a stone. Sound familiar? Here again is another similarity between the death and burial of Lazarus and the death and burial of Jesus. John the master storyteller is preparing us.

After Jesus prays, he calls with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." In doing so it "reminds us that the sheep have the ability to hear the voice of their shepherd. Lazarus will hear his name being called and will come out of the tomb." As Lazarus responds to Jesus' call, we realize that he is "not only a dear friend but also a disciple, a follower, a believer, a sheep of Jesus' own fold who knows the voice of his shepherd" and responds.

Just this past Wednesday evening we heard the teaching from Jesus wherein he calls himself the good shepherd: a shepherd who knows the names of all of his sheep. Jesus calls Lazarus by name because he knows him. The good news for us is that we can trust that Jesus will call us by name because he knows us. We are the sheep of his flock.

And now, one last connection between the raising of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Jesus. As Lazarus "walks out of the tomb, the description of the strips of cloth around his hands, feet, and face are the same as will be for Jesus." When Jesus instructs the bystanders to "unbind" Lazarus, it is more than just an unwrapping of strips of cloth. It is the unbinding of a man's spirit. Having experienced death, he now steps forth to experience life once again. This story points to the promise of the resurrection that Jesus made to us. We will be unbound as we step from our graves to experience life once again.

"This miracle, the final sign in John is yet another example of grace upon grace" as referred to at the very beginning of the gospel (1:16) What does this grace upon grace look like? It looks like bodies raised from their tombs still dressed in their burial shrouds. What does grace upon grace sound like? It sounds like the voice of your good shepherd calling you when you are deader than dead. It sounds like the voice of the shepherd who knows you and loves you, and calls you, enabling you to walk out of your tomb, unbound to rest in the bosom of Jesus.

That my friends is grace upon grace. God's unearned love showered out upon the friends of Jesus. That's the good news for us today: we are the sheep in Jesus' flock. We are known personally and by name. Jesus considers us his friends. And it is all grace.