

John 11:1-44
Do You Believe This?
SWCoB 3.9.14

Often when there is an unanticipated death of a loved one
We worry ourselves sick with the “what ifs.”

“What if I had been there?”

“What if they chose to stay home on that fateful day?”

Or “why would God allow something like this?”

Or even “where was God when this happened?”

We see this sentiment in our Scripture lesson today.

After Lazarus died, Mary and Martha both exclaim

If only Jesus would have been here

Our Lazarus would still be living today.

We process tragedies over and over

Placing in our minds the different scenarios

Of how it should have ended.

It strikes me, however, as almost unthinkable

That after hearing the news of his best friend’s illness

Jesus remained away for another two days.

Jesus says it was to encourage people to believe in him.

That may be

But with incredible risk

And the sisters’ heartbreak and despair.

Our passage today is the seventh, of what scholars call
“The Seven Signs of the Gospel of John.”

These signs occur between chapters 1 and 12.

The Seven Signs are as follows:

1. The turning of water into wine (John 2:1-12)
2. The healing of the royal official's son (John 4:46-54)
3. The healing of the paralytic at the Bethesda pool
(John 5:1-17)
4. The feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14)
5. The walking on water (John 6:15-25)
6. The healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41)
7. The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-46)

Each sign points to Jesus as God’s chosen One.

This, the seventh sign

Points to the power Jesus has even over death!

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We are like Mary and Martha

As they grieved the loss of their brother.

We, too, cry out in the midst of death and tragedy

And ask, “Jesus, where are you?”

We, too, wonder how a loving, powerful God

Stands by and so callously does nothing

As we experience someone’s sudden death.

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Charles Swindol, in his book, “The Darkness and the Dawn”

Shares the story of a memorial service held on a site

Where two planes collided in midair

Over the Grand Canyon.

Swindol writes that during the service

Suddenly a man in the group cried out in anger ‘Where was God when this happened?’ His words echoing down through the vast canyon and back to everyone’s ears.

Where was God when this happened?

Where was God when this . . . ?

Where was God . . . ?

Where . . . ?

The minister, after several moments of uncomfortable silence, quietly spoke and said, ‘Where was God when this happened? I have only one answer.’

God was in the same place He was when men took His Son and crucified Him on the cross.’

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Philip Yancey, in his book entitled

What Good is God? In Search of a Faith that Matters

Addresses a common problem we have with God.

“Where is God when we suffer?”

Yancey’s book focuses on the Newtown, Conn killings.

Tragedy rightly calls faith into question, but it also affirms faith. It is good news that we are not the random byproducts of a meaningless universe, but rather the creations of a loving God who wants to live with us forever.

When tragedy strikes

And we lift our voices to the hills

And we ask from where does our help come?

Yancey responds by declaring

God has chosen to respond to our predicament not by waving a magic wand to make evil [or death] disappear, but by joining us and absorbing it in his very person.

Jesus uses the tragic loss of his dear friend, Lazarus

To assure us that death does not have the final say.

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Both Martha and Mary say to Jesus

That if only he had been here

This wouldn't have happened.

And Jesus replies, **Your brother will rise again (23).**

Jesus then says something

That has forever echoed down the halls of history

A truth quoted so many countless times since

In funerals and tragic circumstances

John 11:25-26 NRSV

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

~~

The next scene in our passage is very descriptive.

When everyone had gathered at the grave
Jesus approaches and becomes deeply distressed.

Where have you laid him?

They said to him, “Come and see” (34).

And as he stood at the grave, **Jesus wept (35).**

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This is the shortest verse in the Bible.

The earliest manuscripts of the Bible
Did not include verse and chapter numbers.

They were inserted several hundred years later.

And it's always been a wonder to me how they designated
The various chapters and verses in the Bible.

Frankly, much of the placement doesn't make sense.

However, when the scholarly scribes
Inserted the chapter and verse numbers

In whatever rational they used
When they came to this place in the Bible

They paused and reflected
On that short but profound sentence.

Jesus wept!

So deep, so probing, so revealing those two words are
On the nature and character of Christ

They chose to give it its own verse!

From Yancey

That 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son' in order to reconcile with his rebellious creation. That by entering our world, the Son took on our sufferings and temptations, demonstrating in person that nothing—not even death—can separate us from the love of God.

The evidence of God's love is demonstrated here.

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The last scene in Bethany is straight out of Hollywood.

Jesus asks to move the stone from the mouth of the grave.

The KJV describes Martha's comments best.

John 11:39b KJV Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

Yes, he stunketh!!

But ignoring the stench, Jesus calls, **Lazarus, come out!**

And just like the movies, Lazarus walks out
His body still wrapped in burial linens
Like a scene from *The Return of the Zombies!*

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In the last words of our passage

Jesus instructs those around him

Unbind him and let him go (44),

I can't help but think Jesus is speaking to death itself.

To unbind Lazarus from the grip of the Grim Reaper.

For not even death has authority over Jesus.

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This scene in Bethany is a prelude
 To what will happen a few weeks later
 On a hill called Golgotha.

They will torture Jesus and then nail him to a cross
 And Jesus will die a horrifying death.

And the disciples will ask
 God, where are you? If only you had been here.
 This wouldn't have happened.

And God's answer came three days later.

For by the very same power
 That ordered creation to rise out of a formless void
 Jesus rises up from the clutches of death!

~~

Martha cries out
 "But Lord, he stinketh!"

Yes, Lord, he stinketh!
 Lord, we all stinketh!

We walk through life like zombies
 Slowly decomposing our way to the grave.

We are wrapped in burial cloths
Trapped in the inevitable trek towards death!

But Jesus is saying something else.
Death does not have the final say!

He calls us from the graves we dig

He orders the things that bind us
The things that rot in us
The things that stinketh in us

To come out, unbind, and let loose!”

~~

Jesus asks Martha, do you believe this?”

Martha responds:

John 11:27 NIV ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

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When we are facing the tragic loss of a loved one
And are tempted to ask, “Where is God in all this?”

Remind yourself bad things will happen
Suffering is part and parcel of life
Not everything’s going to turn out well.

I quote from Sheila Walsh:

“Christianity is not this nice “everything’s going to work out okay” attitude. When you think of Christ at the tomb of Lazarus, he wept because it wasn’t supposed to be like this. He had spoken this beautiful world into existence and it was so broken, so messed up.

I think one of the greatest gifts we can give is just a dose of reality that life down here is disappointing, that God doesn’t always give us answers, but [God] always give us himself.”

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Can you believe this?

Is it even possible in this day and age

To believe something so contrary to modern science
In this post-Christian world?

That Jesus could raise Lazarus after 4 days in the grave?

That God could raise Jesus after 3 days?

That we too can be raised from the grave?

Fred Craddock writes

Whoever has looked upon the crucified Jesus and said "Son of God," has believed not just because of but also in spite of.

The believer has chosen, has taken a risk, has said yes in a world of nos.

I say there is more than just a possibility.

Much of today's writing on NDEs (Near Death Experiences)
On those who have experienced death
All seem to have one thing in common.

A figure of light on the other side
Waiting for them, inviting them, beckoning them.

There is this tremendous sense
Of love radiating from this light.

And so, maybe when Lazarus opened his eyes on that day
And stumbled out of the tomb
And saw the bright daylight behind Jesus

Maybe for a moment
He couldn't figure out which side of life he was on
(from Buechner).

The Apostle Paul sums it up very nicely.

Romans 8:37-39 CEV

³⁷ In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. ³⁸ I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, ³⁹ and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!