

“LIFE AND DEATH”

John 11:1-53

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

April 2, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 11, verses 1 through 53. It is on page 760 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, we learn what Jesus did to earn himself a death sentence. It's a long reading. So please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 11, we begin reading at verse 1.

^{11:1} Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸ The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” ⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” ¹² The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the

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place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.”

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.”

⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” ⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

We look at the cross and ask, “Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?” That is, “What did you do that was so bad, your own people condemn you as a criminal and beg the Romans to kill you? How hast thou offended?”

So what did Jesus do? He preached the good news of the Kingdom of God. He forgave sins. He healed people. He opened the eyes of a man born blind. He even had the audacity to raise dead people from the grave! I mean, *How dare he, right?*

Okay, that sounds absurd. I mean, what’s wrong with any of those things? Nothing. Those are all good things. So how does it happen that these things lead to his death?

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There is a lot we could talk about in this gospel lesson. The most wonderful parts are the raising of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days (11:43-44), and Jesus’ promise of a resurrection to eternal life for all who believe in him (11:25-26). Those are clearly the highlights of the reading. And we’re certainly not going to ignore those parts, but since we are getting deeper into Lent, we’re going to focus this morning on how this miraculous sign leads to Jesus’ crucifixion. After all, if not for Jesus’ death on the cross, the promise of eternal life would be ... well ... empty. None of us would receive the resurrection to eternal life. Not even Lazarus would live forever. And if you look around in *The Gospel of John*—a few chapters before this and a few chapters after—you will see that everything is specifically leading up to the cross.

The Jewish leaders are getting mad at Jesus. Jesus is healing people on the Sabbath, which they consider to be a violation of the Law (9:16). And on two other occasions, the Jews actually try to stone Jesus for blasphemy (8:59; 10:31). Those were attempted crimes of passion, and Jesus managed to escape. But in this gospel lesson the Jewish leaders realize they need a more concrete plan.

So what is it about raising Lazarus from the dead that inspires the Pharisees and chief priests to get organized?

Let’s look at the text.

Now, Jesus was already in hot water with the chief priests and Pharisees. Jerusalem was not a safe place for him. But his friend Lazarus got sick. Now Lazarus, along with his sisters Mary and Martha, lived in a village called Bethany (11:1). And Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem (11:18). It was as close to being a suburb as you can get. So going to Bethany was just about as dangerous as going to Jerusalem.

So Jesus and his disciples hear about Lazarus’ illness. And when Jesus tells his disciples that the sickness will not end in death (11:4), they think it’s a bad idea for Jesus to go to Bethany. If Lazarus is going to get better, then there’s no need for Jesus to risk his life (11:8, 12). But what the disciples don’t understand, is that Jesus himself is the reason the illness will not end in death. The illness does actually *result* in death, and Jesus knows this. But Jesus also knows that it will not *end* in death. Jesus is capable of undoing death, and that’s what he’ll do.

So it turns out that Lazarus actually died before Jesus and his disciples even started out for Bethany, and Jesus knew this too. But the disciples were a little bit confused, because Jesus didn’t call death, “death.” Instead, he called it, “sleep” (11:11). This is the Bible’s special word for death. And this word *sleep*—it is a marvelous gift of God to us. When a child of God dies, *sleep* is the right word to use, because when someone falls asleep, we expect them to wake up again. And God gives us this word to remind us that they will. Every time we use the word *sleep* to describe the death of one of God’s dear children, we are confessing the glorious and comforting truth of the resurrection from the dead.

So I’ll give you a little tip in case you ever find yourself writing an obituary, either for yourself or for another Christian. The best way to start is to say something like this: “On such and such a date, so and so *fell asleep in Jesus Christ.*” This communicates three important things: First, that the person was a Christian, second, that they died, and third, that we haven’t seen the last of them. The word *sleep* lets us confess our glorious hope in the resurrection from the dead. Jesus will return to earth, and he is going to take whatever is left of that body and put

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it back together again, even better than it was before. That is why Jesus gives us this beautiful word, *sleep*.

Jesus talks more about this when he gets close to Bethany, and Martha, the sister of Lazarus, comes out to meet him. She has this complaint, which is also a confession of faith: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21).

Then Jesus assures her, “**Your brother will rise again**” (11:23).

Now, Martha thought Jesus was talking about the resurrection on the Last Day (11:24). And he was. Jesus continues to comfort her by saying, “**I AM the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.**” (11:25-26)

These are among the most comforting words in all of Scripture. They are a promise to Martha, as well as to whoever believes in Jesus, that death is not the end. Even though you die ... And even though your loved ones who believe in Jesus die ... death is not the end.

The dead will rise in the resurrection on the Last Day. Our eternal hope as Christians is not some body-less, floaty existence in a ghost-like heaven. It is a real, physical life in God’s New Creation, but without all the pain and suffering that is so engrained in this material world. And Martha believed this promise of God for herself and for her brother.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, “**Your brother will rise again.**” But in the case of Lazarus, there was also a little bit more. There was a double meaning to Jesus’ words. Because Jesus was going to give a sign. He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead that very day. It was a sign to prove that Jesus *is* the Resurrection and the Life, and he *will* raise the dead on the Last Day.

So when Jesus finally gets to the tomb, along with a bit of a crowd, he compels them to remove the stone (11:39-41). Then he says a prayer (11:41-42) and cries out, “**Lazarus, come out**” (11:43). And the formerly dead man walked out of the tomb (11:44). Jesus raised him from the dead with nothing but his words.

So what was the result of all this? Not surprisingly, many of the Jews who saw what Jesus did, believed in him (11:45). I mean, that’s the logical thing to do when you see someone raise people from the dead. But it’s hard to keep something like this a secret. And that was the problem—not so much for Jesus, but for the religious leaders.

Some of the eyewitnesses reported the miracle to the Pharisees (11:46), and they were concerned. So they got together with the chief priests, and gathered the Sanhedrin—that is, the council—to decide what to do about this Jesus problem (11:47). The problem was that too many people were believing in him. If they let Jesus go on like this, then all the people would believe in him. Then the Romans would come and put an end to the excitement (11:48).

You see, Israel was not a free nation. They were allowed to live and worship with relative freedom, but the Roman Empire was really in control. And as long as everything was peaceful, Rome didn’t have a problem with letting the Jews practice Judaism. But the dangerous thing about Judaism, was the expectation of a Messiah—that is, the Christ. The Jews believed that the Christ would be more of a political figure—that he would lead a revolution to regain Israel’s independence. And from time to time, false christs would appear and incite a little bit of rebellion. But it was in the best interest—both of the Romans and the Sanhedrin—to keep these things at bay. And up until this point, they were able to do just that.

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But now Jesus comes along, and the Jews are a little bit more concerned. The signs he does are unheard of, and if they let him keep going, everyone will believe in him. So far Jesus hasn't shown any political aspirations. But if he does, they won't be able to handle it. Rome would have to come with a massive army, and there would be an all-out war.

This is why Jesus had to die. “Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?” You did too many awesome things, and now the rulers are scared.

So the members of the Sanhedrin are wondering what they should do about their Jesus problem. And Caiaphas, the high priest, speaks up and says, “You guys don't know nothing. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” (11:49-50)

To Caiaphas, the solution was really simple—just kill him. Caiaphas was simply being pragmatic. Whether or not Jesus actually did anything wrong is irrelevant. In order to keep the peace, Jesus must die. And Caiaphas really doesn't care if he's innocent or guilty. His eyes are blinded by fear. And his plan is absolutely evil.

But despite how evil his words sound, they are God's good and gracious will. In fact, these are not even Caiaphas' words. John tells us they are God's words spoken through him (11:51). And Caiaphas has no idea what they actually mean. The irony is so thick we would need a chainsaw to cut it.

That year Caiaphas “prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (11:52). This murderous high priest uttered a true and gracious prophecy from God about Jesus. And he was convinced the prophecy was true, but he had no idea what his words actually meant. He and the other members of the Sanhedrin believed they were doing God's work by arresting Jesus, handing him over to the Romans, and begging them to crucify him. They believed this was God's will in order to save his people. And it was! But they had no idea how. What they meant for evil, God meant for good.

They were looking for a political salvation. Jesus' death was supposed to prevent a war. But that war wouldn't come for another forty years, and it wasn't because of Jesus.

Jesus' death was part of a bigger war. God was working out eternal salvation. Jesus was going to war against sin, death, and the devil. That is the salvation Jesus' death accomplished. That is why Caiaphas prophesied the words he did. Jesus would die for the *sins* of the nation, and not only for their sins, but for the whole world. His death would gather together God's children from every nation and tribe and language around the world. The Son of God was going to war against sin, death, and the devil. He was going to secure that resurrection that he promised to Martha and to all who believe in him. What the Pharisees and chief priests meant for evil, God meant for the greatest good ever.

“Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?” He hasn't, and that's the point. The innocent Son of God in human flesh was condemned to die.

By his death, he destroyed the power of death, along with sin and the devil. He triumphed over them. He secured the resurrection to eternal life for all who believe in him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.