

John 11:25-36

The Lazarus Project

It is the way of some artistic endeavors- certainly of movies and I would think, novels, as well- that the creators sometimes cannot find a satisfactory title, and so as the work is being developed, it is called *the project*, like the Academy Award winning film “Places in the Heart,” that takes place outside Dallas in the 1930s and was known for months during and after production as “The Waxahachie Project.” That is what’s happened with this sermon today. It needed a title for the bulletin long before it was a completed work in the preacher’s mind. Though it is a fair question, is Lazarus truly the focus of the story? If you were asked to summarize this long and intricate account of a miracle, you might say simply that Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus and raises him from the dead. But the fact is, it could have been anybody in the grave. The deeper meaning is found in Jesus meeting Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, and their conversation, and the way in which they share their grief at his passing. The last word of our passage has the outside observers remarking how Jesus must have loved Lazarus, but the beginning of the story, in the first verses of chapter 11, informs us that Jesus loves Lazarus because of Mary and Martha. His closer relationship is with the two women.

Some scholars, and also not scholars, will say that this tale of Jesus and Lazarus is an allegory, or that it is made up entirely; or that it bears the marks of an initiation into a cult or a religious/fraternal order: a man buried and then called out by his master, and comes forth in a symbolic rebirth. But here's the thing, even if we wish to consider this event as literally true in all its details, still it means more than simply what it says. There are hidden meanings that compel us to ask deep questions. Why this miracle in this place in the gospel; why the raising of Lazarus and not one of the other two persons Jesus raised from the dead? The author goes to a lot of trouble to get Jesus to this location with Mary and Martha- and with some other people, who may or may not be on their side.

Most miracles in the gospels are much shorter than this extended passage. It takes up most of chapter 11, four scenes in three locations, with important speaking parts, and background players as disciples and Jewish friends of the family. Scene one has Jesus in another place, receives word that Lazarus is ill, but delays in coming to see or trying to heal him, even though we are told of Jesus' love for the family: thus Mary's sorrowing word- or even her reprimand- to Jesus, "If only you had been here." Martha, earlier, had spoken the exact same words to him. Scenes two and three take place near the tomb where Martha tells Jesus she understands

her brother will be raised in “the resurrection at the last day”; but we know that doesn’t ease her present grief. And Jesus speaks that amazing personal claim in the first verses of our reading, and Martha confesses her faith in him. And then, it’s Mary’s turn, and the scene becomes one of pure emotion: she runs out of the house, falls at Jesus’ feet, and weeps pitifully. In scene four Jesus is led to the tomb, and prays, and calls Lazarus to come out.

That’s the story, what is the word for us? Does the raising of Lazarus really influence the way we believe in Jesus as- how does Martha say it- God’s chosen, God’s Son, the One who comes into the world? Would we believe just the same even if this story had never been passed down to us? Yes, it is a comforting story: Mary weeps- we can picture that, haven’t we also wept, felt inconsolable, our bodies and minds almost out of control; and Lazarus does come forth after Jesus commands him. It comforts us, the power and love of Jesus inspire and make us love him, too. But what thing is hidden in the scripture, and what thing is the promise that makes us trust Jesus- and so confess like Martha, and come to him like Mary with our hurts and know that he will understand and sympathize? Is it enough that Lazarus’ raising justifies Martha’s confession, and eases Mary’s pain; is it enough to make us believe that Jesus will do the same for us?

The final scene is in verses 38-44, Jesus standing there at the tomb, and he lifts up his eyes and prays to God. And he speaks with a loud voice, as though the outcome is already perfectly certain, “Lazarus, come out!” and the dead man comes out, his body still bound with burial bandages, and a cloth over his face. A dramatic climax- or not. The past few weeks our sermon texts have been these: the resurrection story with the two shining men in white who meet the women at Jesus’ tomb, the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain with shining, glorious Moses and Elijah, and the ascension of Jesus with the two shining men who arrive as Jesus is going up, and they tell the disciples that Jesus will return in the same way. But here, as Lazarus struggles out into the daylight after four days in a cave, four days in the darkness under a rock, it is just the opposite. He isn’t clean and glorious and laughing, he still has on the tattered, dingy burial garments, he doesn’t speak, and we can’t see his face- this has all been about him and yet he is almost the man who isn’t there.

And so, the meaning of this story is not that we get to see Lazarus restored, but that we get to see Jesus, as someone worthy of being confessed, as someone who will share the sorrow of a weeping friend, as someone who stands before the entire crowd of people so that they see him praying and understand he is

powerfully and intimately close to God, so that they are called to belief. And so are we. We, also, have had occasions to mourn, and perhaps been comforted, have known the hope of God's presence and been lifted up by the prayers of our friends. Maybe we have even known the Lord's healing that has come with power and assurance, and heard his call, so that we came to him- not shining and glorious, but still wearing the graveyard rags, still mute with the hurt, still feeling the fear and the darkness. But his word makes us new, we believe that, it just takes time; healing takes time. It's why we are here now, to be made a little bit more whole today than yesterday; and to confess and give thanks, for this man- the Chosen, God's Son, the One coming into the world. Yes, lets confess that, that he never stops coming to meet us, and calling to us, and he comes to us now as we gather at his table for communion: where healing begins, in fellowship.

So Jesus at Lazarus' tomb, just speaks in a loud voice, and Lazarus comes out. Jesus doesn't grimace and strain to show how sincere he is, like we sometimes see television preachers do; doesn't repeat a magic formula; doesn't say a special prayer to draw down God's power; doesn't ask God to do a great miracle through him. Doesn't ask anything, in fact. He just says, "thank you for hearing me," and

expresses the wish that all those watching will believe that God had sent him.

Maybe there are a couple of things to take from this.

1) That the purpose of faith may not be what exactly we think- and that the content of faith may not be not made up of all the various things about Jesus we could list, but just this one thing: that God had sent him. Which means that everything he did, he did with God's authority, he did to give honor to God; and he did everything to give back to God those who believed in him.

2) And the second is this, I think: that he was so much God's man, his life and desires so intimately in line with God's desires, that he didn't need to ask for help and guidance in this circumstance; so confident in God's closeness; so certain that he was heard and that the mighty work would be accomplished. He wanted only what God would want, that they would come to believe because of him. And that includes all of us. Jesus little prayer of gratitude is for all of us. That we might see this miracle, and see the heart of this man of power- and of tears- and see in him the glory of God, and believe.