

LENT FIVE – WATER THEME

JOHN 11 THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Through this Lenten season we've been walking with Jesus, mostly through the lens and the pen of the Gospel writer we call John. We found, flowing through the readings, a visual theme of water. In the garden at the beginning of time, Genesis says,

God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground.

We saw Jesus in the wilderness, dry, parched and tempted. We listened in to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus: born from above, Jesus says, by water and the Spirit. With the people of Israel we received water from a rock in the midst of wilderness and wandering. At the well we heard Jesus speak of living water, and last week we watched in awe as he spat in the dust and gave a man back his sight.

Water is life. Water is birthing, cleansing, it is freedom and it is universal. Water runs through this season like the streams from the snowbanks outside when the glorious sun is doing its springtime magic; offering to our dried out skin and longing eyes the soft muddy moisture of new life.

Today – a different kind of water -today we see Jesus weep. Tears – the water of compassion; the water of human grief. Many people know this verse because it comes up in Bible quizzes. What's the shortest verse in the Bible, they ask and the answer is John 11:35 Jesus wept.

For many people, this is astonishing, even offensive. Through Christian history, there have been people who tried to say this isn't so....it means he only seemed to weep, he made as though to weep for the sake of the sisters....for people who hold high the divinity of Jesus, to find him weak, vulnerable to the feelings of ordinary grief, is somehow to diminish him. How do you feel about that? As you see him at the tomb of his friend, weeping....does this make himless, somehow?

For me, these tears are somehow at the deepest core of our faith. Not that we ever have all the answers, but to follow a Lord, to worship and name as divine this man – human in every way like us, who weeps real tears and feels real pain....this is the scandal and the glory of the gospel. It's at the very heart of Christianity. God feels our pain. God is not removed, apart, so high that we are left alone in our despair but rather God weeps with us. The water of Jesus' tears is the very thing that reveals the awesome compassion of God.

So many times people say “how can you believe in God when God allows this or that to happen”
Where was God when....or why is God doing this to me

And what we can do is first of all not give an answer so much as listen to the pain that prompted the question and hold them close in whatever way is right for the moment....and then point to Jesus, who weeps at the death of his friend and who ultimately hangs, feeling abandoned by God, on a Roman cross. Some kind of God! One who suffers and weeps. No wonder some people turn in disappointment – to continue their search for a superman; a man of steel, a God who waves magic wands to suspend the laws of nature on their behalf. They are welcome to their search. As for me, I will stand here with

Jesus.

This water – these tears – this is theologically huge.

This chapter is simply wonderful, and for a few minutes I want to walk through it in a very pedestrian way, simply pointing out some of the richest and juiciest parts.

So, come with me on a little walk through the story. First though, I will just review the process by which we have this gospel. I know I've said it before but it's really worth the review. I apologize if I'm telling you something you already know:

in the first years after Jesus' death and resurrection, nothing was written down. They believed that Jesus was coming back, and soon, certainly within their lifetimes. They had no idea that there would ever be a second generation of them who had not known Jesus of Nazareth.

When it became clear that Jesus was not coming back as soon or in the way they had thought, and as those who had known him in the flesh began to die off, they began to think: maybe we'd better write this stuff down.

Collections of sayings and stories were written, things that were easy to memorize for beginners, the beatitudes, the Lord's prayer and so on....

and finally these were gathered into the gospels. There were lots of gospels written. Of them, we have four in our bible. Of those four, Mark wrote first, about 60 years after the resurrection. Ten years later, Matthew and Luke each in separate places, and with a copy of Mark in front of them, wrote their own gospels, They copied him, followed his account of things, and added material unique to them, corrected Mark's grammar, made their own gospels. So those three often agree on things and because of that they're called the synoptics. About 10 years after that, John wrote, as far as we know, not using the synoptics at all. His gospel is very different in a lot of ways from the other three.

One difference is the "I am" sayings

another is the use of the term "the Jews"

First: Vs 1 and 2

John feels it's necessary to make sure we know which Mary we're talking about and who it was who had anointed Jesus' feet. The other Gospels tell us different things about who did that so John is just making sure we know his version of that.

Interesting, the picture that we get of Jesus' relationship with this family. They live in Bethany, which is just outside of Jerusalem, and the impression that we get is that Jesus stayed with them when he was in the area; their home a safe place for him. Only in John's gospel do we hear that Jesus loved anyone....and it's only in two places. Here, it says Jesus loved Lazarus, and Mary, and Martha. Later in this Gospel we'll read of the mysterious "disciple whom Jesus loved" at the last supper and later at the tomb...

The role of Thomas is also interesting: Thomas, we know mostly as the doubter right? But....here it's Thomas who speaks up. The truth is that they had been in Jerusalem not long before hand and left, because they knew that Jesus was in danger. The disciples can't believe he's going to walk right into the line of fire by going to Bethany. And in the end it's Thomas, called the twin, who says (What's the tone, do you think? The words are "Let us go also, that we may die with him") Is it sort of "I think this is a really bad idea but we're not letting you go alone?" or....what?

By the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. I read that it was common Jewish belief at that time that after death, the spirit hovered over the body for four days, until decomposition began and the spirit was no longer able to recognize the body. Certainly we know that burial was done

by wrapping the body in cloth, often in a cave with other bodies, and then at a certain length of time afterwards, after decomposition was complete, the tomb would be opened and the bones gathered and put into a smaller container, an ossuary, for final burial or storage.

Notice the roles of Martha and Mary here. We know them from Luke's story about the time Jesus went to their home and Martha was concerned about Mary not helping with the tasks of hospitality, remember? Martha gets the reputation of the one who stays and works the kitchen, while Mary is the one who studies.... women will still say to me "I'm more of a Martha than a Mary" or the opposite. But look here – it's Mary who stays home, and Martha who goes out to meet Jesus and have what is really a theological conversation with him. Just a little warning against stereotyping these two women.

Before I leave that, here's an astonishing thing:

read verses 21 -27

Correct me if I'm wrong here – but to my knowledge only three people in scripture make a claim like that about Jesus while he was in the flesh:

at the cross, the Roman soldier says "surely this was a son of God" (Matthew 27:54)

and Peter, who at Caesarea Philippi, says,

well, let's read it

Matthew 16: 13-20

It's that one I want to highlight – that declaration is, when it all comes down to it, the foundation of the church of Rome. On Peter's confession a whole church is legitimized. So what I want to know is where is the universal church of Martha? No one even remembers that she made the same confession. Doesn't that just make you go "hmmmm"??

Notice that both the sisters blame Jesus – isn't that human? When someone dies, we play the "if only" game. If only often even though we know in our hearts it's not true, we need someone to blame and often it's someone closest to us, we blame the doctors, the hospital, ourselves, God....I love the fact that John has left that part of the story in.

The final thing I want to highlight is that in the context of the whole gospel, THIS is the turning point. Up until now the authorities are hostile to Jesus, but when he raises Lazarus, that's the final thing. He HAS to go.

Notice the role of the people standing by: They are the ones who roll away the stone, and they are the ones Jesus commands to unbind him, set him free.

For me that is the lasting and compelling word of God from this text: Death is not the final word. Ever. God brings new life out of death. This is the word of God, the One who breathed life into the bones in the valley of Ezekiel is the one whose power flows as the water of life into the dry bones of Lazarus, and that is the same One who can and does breathe life into YOU when you need it most. Together we are called by that same Spirit to look for those who are still entombed and bound – and to us he says take away the stone, unbind them, set them free.