

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
April 2, 2017

“Disturbed and Deeply Moved”

“When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews
who came with her also weeping, he was
greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”
John 11:33

PRELUDE

This morning we find ourselves once again
in the fourth gospel, chapter 11, and the
story of Lazarus being summoned,
called out, from his grave.

There is some background material I'd like to address
to enhance our understanding and appreciation
of the great drama that comes to the fore in chapter 11.

It is often noted that the fourth gospel is a unique composition,
quite unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, the synoptic gospels,
that share a similar format. The term “synoptic” is derived
from a Greek term that roughly translates as
“**seeing all together.**” The synoptic gospels have
similar stories, a shared sense of sequence or a
common trajectory, with overlapping expressions
of content. Academics call this shared perspective
“parallelism.” Some of you may have used in study
the “gospel parallels,” which set columns side by side,
so that you can easily see where there is convergence,
and where there is variance in the material.

The fourth gospel is cut from a different pattern.
There is novelty; and richness, lots of embellishment,
a different mindset is at work, reveling, we might
say, into the depths, the inexhaustible layers of
the Word – that was, that is – the Logos.
Logos was new age lingo current in the first century;

it was the favored teaching term describing evidence of Divinity holding the world together. The Logos was seen as ether in the air, the music of the spheres, the beauty and wonder of life. So how daring of John to assert – the Logos, the Word of God, the Wisdom of God, became flesh. The Logos lodged in Jesus, variously described as Light, as Love, as grace and truth.

An old commentary described the author of the fourth gospel as a “**sacramental mystic**” (*Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 445). The mystic boldly proclaims: “**No one has ever seen God.**” But if you see Jesus – you are as close as you can conceivably imagine. There was divinity at work in Jesus’ humanity, and the fourth gospel is eager to impart and to explain the nature of that divinity, the reality of that divinity, for life to abound. So we hear Jesus speaking in John: “**I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly**” (John 10:10).

Last fall I delivered a paper on Oliver Sacks, the brilliant neurologist who found himself in writing about his work with the odd, the peculiar, the broken creatures of the world. He once said: “**I never use one adjective if six seem to me better and, in their cumulative effect, more incisive**” (*On the Move*, p. 190).

Sacks was rarely terse and pointed, but unapologetically profuse with employment of words. So also, the author of fourth gospel. To be, I suppose, more incisive.

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A major part of design in the fourth gospel is “**signs.**” Signs as notable events in which the God in Jesus, the Word incarnate, is exposed, revealed. Signs of wonder fill the first twelve chapters in John; they reveal Word/Logos embodied by Jesus. Scholars count the signs, and generally number seven of them:

- (1) water into wine at Cana, the first of the signs;
- (2) healing of a child in Capernaum, the son of a Roman official;
- (3) healing of a paralytic in Bethesda (John 5);
- (4) feeding of the 5,000 (John 6);
- (5) Jesus walking on water (John 6);
- (6) healing the man born blind (John 9);
- (7) raising Lazarus (John 11).

There is an ironic twist
in considering these signs.
Jesus himself is ambivalent
about their effectiveness.
People were awed by the signs,
entertained by the signs,
but they didn't always draw the
conclusion intended by the sign.

They saw the sign(s),
but could misperceive
their meaning.

People either wanted to place him in an office he
didn't want (taking him by force to make king; John 6:15);
or, they kept upping the ante, wanting more to change
their made up minds.

**“Unless you see signs and wonders
you will not believe.”**

(John 4:48)

**“What sign are you going to give us ...s o
that we may see it and believe you?”**

(John 6:30)

**“Although he had performed so many
signs in their presence, they did not believe
in him.”**

(John 12:37)

So - there is a reluctance of sorts,
to engage in awesome acts of power;
they simply didn't always produced
the intended outcome - which was
to impart the love and life Jesus had to give.
To align and adjust "life" with Logos,
the Logos in you, in me, and in all.

A second distinguishing item in John's gospel:
the threat of death that is always looming over
Jesus' shoulder (Chapters 5, 8, 10, 11).

"My Father is still working, and I also am working"
(John 5:17). The work was upsetting the rulers
of the world. The work was lifting up the lowly,
finding the lost, feeding the hungry, mending the
sick, and enrolling the uninsured. So people
wanting to hoard and control Logos as their
own were seeking "all the more" to push a delete
button that Jesus might be removed, his mission
thwarted.

This threat of death is part of the backdrop to
chapter 11. Lively debate turned violent in
chapter 10. Jesus had made a plea - **if you don't
believe in me, at least believe in my work** (John
10:38). But some took up stones.
Not as easy as pulling a trigger or setting a noose,
but with the same intent. To still and to silence
Jesus. So Jesus needed to run. He ran for his life,
across to the eastside of the River Jordan.

So - Jesus - on the eastside of the River Jordan.
Safe and secure from all alarms. With good company.
That's where Jesus is when Lazarus gets sick.

That's where he is when he receives the message:
"Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3).

Jesus does not make haste to return to the area where his picture is posted as a "most wanted" in the post office. He tarries. He is slow to respond. He speaks euphemistically to the disciples, "Lazarus has fallen asleep." But then, he speaks directly, Lazarus is dead, and we must go to him.

On the way, he encounters sister Martha -
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21).

And then, a second encounter, with sister Mary -
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32).

This is an accusation -
Lord, he whom you love is dead,
and it could have been different,
if only you had been here.

It was Rabbi Harold Kushner
who wrote the book,
When Bad Things Happen to Good People.
He lost a child to a degenerative disease,
and he spent a good number of years asking
the question - "why?" Why the child?
Why our family? Why the imposition of
such unmerited suffering?

There is a distinction to be drawn between
natural death and preventable death.
All loss incites sorrow, brings grief.
But the Lazarus death has registered a
deep shock. It was, we might say,

untimely, possibly preventable.
And Jesus is faulted.

It is important to “see” Jesus
in this moment.
He has no trick, no wand to wave,
no rabbit leaps out of a hat.
He who is the embodiment of Logos,
he who can perform signs and wonders,
is overcome when faced with grief.

The grief is overwhelming.
Jesus - having been charged with neglect -
is “**greatly disturbed.**”
“**Terribly upset**” (Cont. Eng. Version).
“**groaned in the spirit, and was
troubled**” (KJV).

There is intense agitation stirred up
from within.
He is, so reads my commentary
that addresses the Greek, enraged.
And the rage erupts - it is uncontrollable -
the eyes cramp shut,
tears win out, as Jesus weeps.

So here we have it:
weeping rage.
Not just weeping.
Not just rage.
Weeping rage.

I was in seminary when I encountered a work
by Ernest Becker entitled: *The Denial of Death*.
The work came to mind this week in dealing
with this lesson. Becker traces in this work
what he calls “**immortality projects.**” We construct
all kinds of elaborate systems with flags,
to conjure hope and give meaning to life.

Religious systems were seen by Becker as largely failing, as I recall, which prompted him to consider what alternative we construct.

Jesus does not permit us to deny death. This lesson, in fact, is a forceful reality check - my God, bad things happen to good people. My God, a horrible thing happened to Lazarus, and a horrible thing is going to befall Jesus. He also has a date with death, that could be postponed, but not cancelled.

This, too, is a sign we need to see, and hopefully understand: the weeping rage of Jesus, at the havoc, the devastation, death imposes upon us. We need see it, for it is so rare, so raw. The temptation is to shut it down, turn it off, to let Jesus, the performer of signs, snap his fingers, and make it go away.

John gives us this moment, not to deny death, but to keep it real. So we also might ask: where is our weeping rage?

Not at death that comes by way of nature, but at the preventable deaths, that deny to so many the lives God intends?

Jesus ventures to the tomb where Lazarus has been wrapped and buried. Four days dead - which is really dead. With a prayer to the Father and a loud cry, Lazarus - the one whom Jesus loved - is called out.

The current issue of *Time Magazine* poses the question: “Is Truth Dead?” We have fallen into an incredibly low estate with regard to truth. The credibility quotient of our leader(s) is dangerously low. When you don’t believe the message, and you don’t believe the messenger, the fabric of trust necessary for communal/governmental is subverted.

And where is our weeping rage?

Weeping rage is an extension of God’s amazing grace at work in our lives.

It is what enables Jesus to venture to Lazarus’ tomb, to pray to the Father, and cry, “come out!”

It is what we do when we see the world unraveling with preventable deaths, and we cry out as intercessors, facing death so as to foster life.

It is what we do when we believe out loud, when we stand together, work together, to build a city where gospel rules, and the truth is precious and worthy to be protected and praised.

And the truth we are asked to ponder today is our own mortality, which is not be denied, rather embraced, such that we ask – knowing my days are numbered, how dare I live, with whom and for what purpose?

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Now I need leave this lesson, but let me close with this, for I find it intriguing. Curious, this Lazarus. Scripture

is clear – he is the one whom Jesus loved. Lazarus of Bethany.

In the tomb, wrapped up, decomposing, a corpse that “**Stinketh**” (KJV). He is a stinky guy. Don’t you wonder what was going on with Stinky Lazarus when he heard the cry of Jesus to come out? I wonder what he was thinking.

Jesus - is that you calling?
Jesus - you want what?
You’re calling me back into the world
where I’ve already died once?
Are you wanting me to have yet
another round?

I’ve paid my dues to death once.
If you love me, why not let me rest?

Lazarus is a bit of an unsung hero in our scripture.
He died. And he was willing to die yet again.

And possibly again and again – to heed the summons:
Come out. And in coming out – there was community
to meet and greet and tend to him. They unbound
him and let him go.

This is all part of our work when we believe out loud.
to love and serve the lost and forsaken, to seek and find
and set free. To reckon with death – that we might
cherish life, and to do so in accordance with the love
that is always raising us up – now and forever. Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*