

This is the fourth in a series of Lenten sermons on receiving our lives from Christ. Last week we examined the passage that precedes our text today and witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. But today we discover that seeing is not necessarily believing.

+++

Up to this point, the eleventh chapter of John has focused its attention on Jesus, Martha and Mary, and then on Lazarus. But throughout the chapter John has reminded us that a crowd of observers have been in the background. Now, after Lazarus has been called out of the tomb, John draws his attention directly on the crowd when he tells us, “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.” (11:45-46) The Pharisees were not impressed.

Now in fairness to the Pharisees, it’s not easy to be as religious as those guys had to be. You had to work hard at being righteous all the time, get your theology just right with no doubts or questions, live carefully, and constantly strive to do better and better in hopes of impressing God. After spending most of your life doing this, the last thing you want is for someone to show up trying to change the rules.

The Pharisees were startled by Jesus claim that their cherished law boils down to loving God and your neighbor. They were irritated by all his talk of mercy and forgiveness, offended by his carelessness with the Sabbath regulations, and were threatened by his popularity. But they were terrified when they heard Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. “So,” the text says, “the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council.” (Of course they did. That’s what we religious folks always do when we’re afraid.) They said, “What are we to do?... If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” (11:47-48)

Isn’t that striking? Again, we’re told many people saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and believed in him. But some went to tell the religious hierarchy who became afraid. So, the raising of Lazarus thrusts everyone into a choice. We can either believe in Jesus or be afraid of Jesus. Those are the only two options. According to John, no one remains neutral about Jesus after Lazarus is raised from the dead. That’s because now it is clear that Jesus can change the way it is.

Much of our understanding of the way it is with life is built around the dread, or denial of death. Some of us try to accomplish and build as much as we can. Others cling to love as tightly as possible. And still others collect as many things, or wonderful experiences as they can hold. We work so hard to construct whatever our idea of a good life may be, while we can, because we know it is only a matter of time before someone blows a whistle and our time is over.

I have never met anyone who is agnostic about death. Death, we all believe in. We believe not only in the death of our bodies, but also in the death of our relationships, good health, careers, and dreams. The good times, we know, always come to an end.

But what if someone were to come along who could defeat the power of death, and who could make you believe that there is more after loss? Some of us would be so thrilled, just as some were when Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb. Others of us would be terrified, just as those who went to the religious authorities and said that Jesus wants to change our way of life. And they were absolutely correct about that.

If Jesus had simply comforted Martha and Mary after Lazarus died, no one would have thought twice about that. If he had rushed to heal Lazarus and prevent his death, the crowd would have been impressed but not afraid. However, someone who can defeat the power of death will either give you reasons for great hope or reasons for great alarm. It all depends on the deal you have made with how it is.

How it was, in the first century, was not good for most of the Jews. The burden of Roman taxation was crippling. The people's freedom was restricted. Caesar controlled their vassal king and could demand whatever he wanted, and he threatened to destroy them if they caused trouble. It was an oppressive way of life that had been around for a long time. Despite this, some of the religious leaders had made a deal of sorts with life under the Romans. No one had a better deal than Caiaphas who was the high priest. He governed with the former high priest, his father-in-law Annas, whispering in his ear.

There were two political parties that competed for power on the Jewish Council known as the Sanhedrin. On the right side of the aisle were the Pharisees who were conservative when it came to morals and lifestyles. On the left side were the aristocratic Sadducees, who were theologically liberal and did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. Rome determined who would be the High Priest. For eighteen years Caiaphas, a Sadducee, has kept the job, which is a tribute to his political savvy.

The Sadducees lived well with the Romans, and were just worried about their chief priests, the temple, and their wealth. The Pharisees thought the Romans were Gentile sinners. They were worried about the nation's holiness and thought the only thing worse than the Romans was a Jewish rabbi who kept breaking the law by healing on the Sabbath. So, when they all got very worried that "everyone will believe" in Jesus, Caiaphas found bilateral support on the ruling council with his motion to kill Jesus. And "from that day on they planned to put him to death." (11:53)

That's what happens when we get good at coping with how it is in a world full with loss - we become afraid of the high cost of hope.

But let's put ourselves on this ruling council. Most of us also have something going for ourselves in this way of life. Maybe it's a good job, a few friends, or a little money put away. Maybe it's enough power to achieve some of your dreams. So, do you really want a Savior to raise you to a new way of life?

It's tempting to just want a Savior who only makes a few improvements and keeps loss at bay for you. That's what the Romans can do for you. But Jesus has little interest in the lousy deal the Romans offer, because no matter how well you are doing, you're still just coping with inevitable loss. And that inescapable thought is always lingering in our mind, weaving itself into every good moment as a thread of despair, making it impossible to truly enjoy even the good.

What Jesus wants is to give you a whole new life. This is a life that ends not in death because it is an eternal life that began from the moment of your baptism. It's a life you can never lose because it keeps rising from every loss. And if Jesus can defeat death, he can undermine a society that is built on the assumption that you must grab what you want before you lose it all.

The life Christ was literally dying to give us is not life as a fleeting accomplishment, but as an unfolding mystery - received day after day. It's a life lived not in dread of the inevitable but in our great hope that if even death is not certain, then all things are possible. Amen.