

If you were in church on Sunday, March 22, you heard me preach on 45 verses from John 11 which was the Gospel reading for the Eucharist. As an aside, the lay team of licensed officiants for services of the word have been asked to use the lections appointed for the Eucharist on Sunday even if the service is Morning Prayer to preserve the rhythm of moving through the lectionary. Our Gospel lesson this evening is the first 16 of those 45 verses from the 11th chapter of John. The lectionary spreads the passage at Evening Prayer over three days. The story is of the death of Lazarus this evening, Jesus' delay tomorrow, and Jesus' raising Lazarus on Friday. I can't just use the March homily again this evening if for no other reason than it is too long for an Evening prayer homily.

You will also recall if you were with us last Wednesday that I said and I quote: ...one cannot understand the Gospel of John unless you come at any portion of the Gospel with the Prologue firmly in mind. The rest of the Gospel exists to support and illustrate the Prologue. The purpose of each story within the Gospel is not the report of something that happened; it is a story to illustrate the truth of the Prologue. So it is with the story of Lazarus. Since we aren't going to be together tomorrow evening or Friday, I am going to ignore the limits of this evening's reading and speak of the story of Lazarus as a whole.

Again borrowing from the March 22nd homily, the Lazarus story is the final miracle of 7 recounted in John to reinforce the prologue: *In the beginning the word was with God and the word was God* and a little later in the prologue: *The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth*. The seven miracles are as follows:

1. Turning Water into Wine (John 2:1–11): Jesus acts as Lord of nature, changing water into wine at Cana.
2. Healing the Nobleman's Son (John 4:46–54): Jesus shows his authority over life by healing from a distance.
3. Healing the Lame Man at Bethesda (John 5:1–15): Jesus acts as the restorer of lost powers on the Sabbath.
4. Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5–14): Jesus proves Himself as the bread of life capable of sustaining believers.
5. Walking on Water (John 6:16–21): Jesus demonstrates dominion over nature and guidance to his disciples.
6. Healing the Man Born Blind (John 9:1–7): Jesus reveals Himself as the light of the world, curing blindness.
7. And finally we come back to raising Lazarus from the Dead (John 11:1–44): The climax of the signs, showing Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

Each of the miracles reinforce the Prologue's assertion of Jesus as the incarnate Word of God who has existed from before time. The story of Lazarus is the culmination second only to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. By the way of the 7 miracles only feeding the 5000 and Jesus walking on water occur in any of the other Gospels.

It is difficult some 1900 years after John's Gospel was written to really appreciate the language. We come from 5 centuries of growing literalism. We live in a culture that cares largely only whether something is literally true. The culture and language in Ephesus as the Gospel of John was written was Greek. Myth, metaphor, and symbolism counted infinitely more than literal truth. You may remember in March I used Aesop's fable of the Tortoise and the Hare. It is clearly literally untrue, but it survives 27 centuries since its creation as an important illustration of an essential truth. The questions that 21st century people might ask like did Jesus turn water into wine? Did Jesus feed the 5000? Did Jesus walk on water? Are nothing more or less than irrelevant. That is not why the stories were told and laid down in writing. Literal truth or this happened and that happened were not the motivator of the authors. Illustrating mythic examples of the singularity and divinity of Jesus was the author's motivation.

Demanding and, indeed, fabricating literalism out of the bible is a product of 19th century, anti-intellectual, fear-ridden fundamentalism out of the United States. Every word of the Bible was written by God. What insufferable, blasphemous, and laughable nonsense. The Bible represents roughly a thousand years of human faithful attempts to understand to what God is calling us. It is deeply influenced by historical context, different cultural backgrounds, and a whole range of human experience. All these influences blended together into one sacred book are what makes the Bible both mysterious and infinitely valuable. If we wish to be Biblical people, we must be like Jacob wrestling with the divine wrestler at Peniel. We must wrestle with the text; we must try to put aside our cultural presumptions; we must risk seeing through a glass darkly knowing that revelation will rarely come easily or immediately; we must come back and back again to the texts throughout our lives knowing that age, experience, and prayer can open access to us more broadly while they close off dead ends.

Above all when reading the Gospel of John, we must remember from John 13: 34 and 35: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" And we must always remember the 18 verses of the Prologue. Tonight I end with part of verse 3 and all of 4 and 5. *...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.* Can we make full use of that light, and can we reflect that light to all around us in love. That is the question. Amen