

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
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Lent 5: Ps 130; Ezek 37:1-14; Rom 8:6-11; Jn 11:1-45

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In a book I used during our Lenten series on spirituality, the author speaks of the reluctance of many mainline Protestants to claim and practice an active personal spirituality. He says that whatever we say in our faith affirmations, our practice often reflects that we see God's leading only in two areas: "the ethical conscience and the response to profound grief." Perhaps not all of us would agree with him, but he says "Mainline Protestants live their faith in the paradoxical space between being too modest to speak for God except on social issues, and too reasonable to be truly dependent on God except in times of tragedy."¹

As I said, it might not be the experience of all of us, but as someone who lives more in my head than in my feelings, and as someone who is more comfortable with "mainline Protestant" faith than I usually like to admit, I can see the sense of what this author is saying. Many of us value cool reason over hot emotion, and so it may be only when life gives us a big whack upside the head, like losing someone we love, or when we crash into some other life-shattering crisis—it may be only then that we look around to see where God is. Those times when we have to come to grips with strong, unavoidable, overpowering feelings can be the times when we begin to wonder how God acts in our lives. Most of the other times we manage to manage; we manage to show up to work, get the kids off to school, take our car in for the tune-up, do what we're supposed to do—all without God's involvement, all without giving God much attention. After all, we tell ourselves, God has lots more important things to do and to worry about than to baby-sit us every second of every day.

But when we're struck by paralyzing grief, the kind of grief that Martha and Mary must have felt in losing their brother Lazarus, we find ourselves drowning beyond our depth, beyond our ability to cope. Every thought, every decision, every action seems to be wrapped in a pain that won't go away—sometimes sharp like a knife twisting in our gut, sometimes like a migraine throbbing through the whole body. It's the kind of pain that Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote about:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

Hopkins struggled so very painfully with his faith, probably to the point of clinical depression, and sometimes, as in this poem, it doesn't seem as if he comes out all that joyfully on the other side. All he can say at the end of this poem is that "All / Life death does end and each day dies with sleep." It's those moments of unbearable pain or grief when we think to call on God to enter our lives and give us comfort. It's then we think we might be close to God, when we need God to be close to us. The rest of the time we assume God can go about God's business and we can go about ours.

¹ Joseph D. Driskill (1999). *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology History and Practice*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, p. 5

But the power, the mystery that is the resurrection is not just for the times when we're brought low by grief. It's not just for the tough times in our lives, and it's not just for the central part of our liturgical year, for Holy Week and Easter, fast approaching. The power, the mystery that is the resurrection needs to light Christian spiritual practice year round, to focus our regular discipline of connecting with God in every aspect of our lives.

The raising of Lazarus is the last of Jesus' miracles in John's gospel before the passion story begins. The stories from John's gospel we've heard this Lent have all been long, and they progress thematically in various ways, but one progression is a progression in publicity: Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to Jesus to seek enlightenment in the middle of the night. The Samaritan woman at the well brings other Samaritans to hear Jesus, and they come to believe—but they after all are only Samaritans. The man born blind causes a stir with all the neighbors and the local Pharisees get wind of it and try to do some damage control by dismissing the miracle as a fraud and finally by driving the man born blind out of the worshipping community.

But now the raising of Lazarus from the dead is done in full view of a lot of people, including the people visiting Mary and Martha from Jerusalem, people who will report back to the Jerusalem authorities. There is no turning back for Jesus. He has made his statement of his identity in full view of the authorities and shown his power before the people so that he has become a threat they cannot ignore. Giving life to his friend is the last miracle he performs before he must give up his own life on the cross.

John shows us Jesus' last miracle of raising up his friend from the dead because it shows the people who were there and it shows all followers of Christ from then until now the ultimate meaning of the incarnation: "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus tells them and tells us. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." This is the ultimate meaning of the incarnation, the ultimate focus of our faith. It is the central element of how our understanding of God changes with the coming of Christ among us, how our relationship with God changes. God came to be human among us to conquer death and show us that we no longer need to be afraid of death, that we no longer need to let the fear of death govern our lives.

The hopefulness of the incarnation at its deepest level is to show us that in the light of God's love life triumphs over death. No matter what we do in this world to promote the forces of death—whether it's torturing prisoners in the name of national security, whether it's poisoning the planet in the name of "creating" wealth, whether it's grinding down the children of our neighbors in hopeless schools that will give them nothing to sustain themselves either in body or in spirit—despite the worst that human beings can do, the coming of Christ to be among us, and his conclusive triumph over the forces of death tell us that the best parts of us, the most life-giving and hopeful parts of us, what Paul calls the Spirit, remain active and strong, will continue to give us abundant life and real peace.

It was a pretty dark time in the first century, during Jesus' lifetime and the lifetime of his followers. Some would say we are in a dark and uncertain time now as well.

-- We don't know how far this economy will sink;

-- We don't know how many of our neighbors will be forced out of their homes or how many of them won't get new jobs;

-- We don't know whether people who are angry at us will get their hands on nuclear weapons;

-- We don't know whether we can ever put this country back on the track towards fairness, justice, and equality.

Like Hopkins, we might look around and think, "No worst, there is none."

When hope is strangled on such a large and progressive scale by the massive display of human sin, it is as if the stench of death is abroad in the land. But Christ conquered death so that we would know the glory of God. Christ conquered death so that we could dig deep in ourselves and find his life-giving, life affirming spirit inside us to light up the world against the darkness. Christ brought enlightenment to Nicodemus in the dark. Christ brought self-knowledge like a cool fresh drink of water to the Samaritan woman. Christ brought light into the dark life of the man born blind. Christ brought new life to Lazarus and freedom from crippling grief to his sisters.

We set our hope in Christ. We, the body of Christ in this place, eat our meal together to give us the strength to shine that hope into the world. May Christ's light shine through us. May Christ's spirit live through us. May we live knowing that in Christ's light and in Christ's spirit we will never die.