

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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John 11:1-45

### **“Jesus’ Example-What Brings Fulfillment?”**

During Lent, we’ve been following Jesus, and the people he encounters, in the Gospel of John. We’ve met some fascinating people, including: Nicodemus, a religious leader who can’t decipher Jesus’ riddle about being born again; the Samaritan woman at the well, who’s five marriages leave everyone but Jesus speechless; and the blind man who got his sight back after Jesus put mud on his eyes. The Gospel of John calls these encounters signs. They are signs of John’s mind boggling assertion that God came to us in the flesh in the life of a Palestinian Jew by the name of Jesus. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” John announces in the first paragraph of his book, “and here are some stories to help you see what that means.”

Today we heard the story of the raising of Lazarus, which is Jesus’ final sign and probably his most incredible sign. It’s not every day that a man who’s been dead in a tomb four days is brought back to life, you know.

Now, before you start asking whether something like this could actually happen or not, please know that such scientific or even philosophical questions are not important to John. So don’t get hung up on the details of the sign, because what’s important is what the sign points to, and this sign points to life-to your life, to my life, and to the full, rich, and wonderful life God wants us to live and to enjoy.

Jesus lived a life that he enjoyed, and some of the people he enjoyed it with were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, 2 sisters and a brother who lived in a little village by the name of Bethany. When our story for today opens, we learn right away that Lazarus is gravely ill. It’s a very serious situation.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were very close friends of Jesus. They were about his age, 30 or so. They were Jesus’ adult friends, the ones who you want to have dinner with, the friends you go on vacation with, the ones with whom you don’t have to pretend to be anyone but who you are. Friends like that are very precious. We don’t know if Jesus had many friends like that. But we do know that these three are those kinds of friends. He eats at their table. He talks things over with them. When he needs a place to stay overnight during a visit to Jerusalem, he stays with them. As his own story is coming to an end, he will stay with them, in their house in Bethany, every night . . . until he dies. The Gospel of John tells us Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It’s the only instance of John specifically naming people Jesus loved.

So, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that Lazarus is gravely ill. But when word reaches Jesus that his dear friend Lazarus is sick, he does something very odd-he stays where he is, for two days! One would think that Jesus, when summoned, would drop

everything to be with his friends at Lazarus' bedside, but instead, he waits two days to go Bethany.

When he announces to the disciples that it's now time to go see Lazarus, the disciples are none too happy, for you see-it's dangerous there. Lazarus lives only 2 miles outside Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem there's a growing concern that Jesus is a nuisance, a trouble maker. Quite frankly, the religious and government leaders are worried that too many people are beginning to follow him and worship him, which could lead to a political uprising and cause them trouble. In fact, just before this story, John tells a story about how some of the religious leaders tried to stone Jesus to death. Ironically, the only disciple who appears to be willing to go with Jesus to see Lazarus is Thomas, the same disciple who will doubt Jesus' resurrection.

But undeterred by his disciples, Jesus sets out with them to Bethany and, sure enough, when they arrive there, they find that Lazarus has been dead in the tomb for four days. Friends from the village have already gathered at the home. They've brought food and they sit with the grieving sisters and try to be helpful and say comforting things. They weep along with them, which is sometimes all you can do to be helpful in a situation like that.

Now, when Martha sees Jesus coming down the road, she is not happy. In fact, she's angry-really angry. She tells him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In other words, you could have prevented this! If you hadn't spent those two extra days doing Lord knows what and had come when I asked you to come, Lazarus wouldn't be dead in that tomb.

It's an honest and valid complaint. And we can learn something from it. We can learn that faith is not without feelings of anger in times of crisis (Francis Taylor Gench, "Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John"). And that it's OK to be angry with God. Mary and Martha are not passive people in this story who blindly tolerate whatever life hands them as the will of God. They tell Jesus they're angry and why. As one scholar points out, they're very adult-like in how they handle their friendship with Jesus and he, in turn, treats them as adults.

But Martha's pain is also intertwined with her faith, and her faith in God tells her that there may still be hope. "I know God will give you whatever you ask of him," she says. Martha knows Jesus has performed some pretty incredible signs, so she still holds out some hope that *maybe* he can do something for her brother.

Jesus responds with a promise: "Your brother will rise again," which Martha hears as general words of comfort, similar to words someone might offer at a funeral when they tell a survivor, "Your loved one is in a better place now."

She replies in kind: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." It's an affirmation of her faith, which promises her that when the world ends, the dead will live again.

But Jesus offers her something much more than this: “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

These words bring us to the very heart of this story and, indeed, to the very heart of John’s gospel. Because what Jesus offers in John’s Gospel is a full and rich life now. For John, eternal life is much more than what awaits us on the other side of the tomb; eternal life is what Jesus offers us now-and it’s rich, and full and full of joy. It’s what Jesus offers us now, and we don’t need to wait until we die to enjoy it.

Of course, this isn’t how we normally think of eternal life. In the popular mind, Christianity is about life after death, getting to heaven when you die. That’s what people equate with eternal life. And it is about that, but it’s about something much more than that, too. It’s about life now—full, rich, complete, deep, free, whole; life now. “Eternal life,” Jesus calls it. It’s a quality of life that begins now. “I have come,” he said, “that you have life and have it fully; I have come that my life—my joy—may live in you.”

Jesus wants us to live our lives fully and completely now, not wait until we reach the other side to start living.

It’s unfortunate, I think, that too many people only hear these words from Jesus at funerals, when it’s too late to start living life. The church would do well, I think, to encourage people to live life more fully, not less so. Somehow, people have gotten this idea that God doesn’t really want us to enjoy our lives or anything the world has to offer. I suppose it stems from our Puritan roots. But as William Sloane Coffin once observed, there’s something wrong when a little boy he knew said, “Religion is all the things you’re not supposed to do.”

We get it into our heads somehow that God doesn’t really want us to enjoy what life has to offer. That what God really wants us to do is read the Bible and pray a lot and think holy thoughts and avoid doing all the things on the list of worldly activities that must be sinful. Why, just recently I read the words of another preacher who wrote that growing up, “he always had the sense that loving the world too much was dangerous, full of temptations of the flesh: music and great movies and good food (it was just too much) and baseball even on Sundays—Sunday doubleheaders, missing church to drive to Pittsburgh with my father, little brother, and two uncles and sit in old Forbes Field to watch baseball and eat hot dogs all day long. I thought it was paradise. It was a lot better than Sunday School.” But somehow, he had it in his head that it wasn’t right with God. (*John Buchanan*)

But then he had a conversion, and grew to realize that the world is a beautiful and good place; that God made it and everything in it and called it good, including human minds and human creativity and human bodies. And that living fully, enjoying this good world fully, is a way of praising and giving glory to God. It’s what God wants us to do; God wants us to live our lives fully and completely.

Henry David Thoreau said he wished to learn what life had to teach now “and not when I come to die, discover that I had not lived.” (Gench, page 87)

“Eternal life,” Jesus calls it. “I have come,” he said, “that you have life and have it fully; I have come that my life-my joy-may live in you.”

But let us not forget, especially on a day when we celebrate a baptism, that living a life of joy also means that we are called to bring joy to people whose lives are not joyful. Presbyterians believe that our baptisms initiate a life of service. Just like Jesus’ baptism began his life of service, so does ours. So while we are called to live our lives to the fullest, enjoying every minute of them, we’re also called to remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, social isolation, oppression and fear from others; to help people tear away the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss, and grief, and unbind men, women and children who are victims of poverty, war, and abuse.

“I have come,” Jesus said, “that you-everyone- may have life and have it fully; I have come that my life-my joy-may live in you-and everyone else, too.”

So the message today is live. Live today and every day. Open your eyes and mind and heart and soul to the stunning fact of your own life. Help other people. Don’t put things off. Tell those you love them that you love them.

Live, as the great theologian Karl Barth put it, like children on Christmas morning, surrounded by gifts we did nothing to deserve, our hearts brimming with gratitude, and our lives full of joy.

Amen.

Sources:

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[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

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