

The Inscrutable Glory of God

John 11:1-6, 32-44

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Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

For the past five weeks I have had the pleasure and privilege of teaching the book of Genesis to two different Bible study groups in our congregation. As I have told my classes, I think the best metaphor for how we are to approach the word of God in scripture is seen in the 32nd chapter of Genesis – when Jacob, who becomes Israel, finds himself wrestling with God until he gets a blessing.

When we read the Bible that is what I think God wants us to do: wrestle with what we find here. Not just nod our heads and go merrily on our way...but rather, grapple with the Word until we can more fully appreciate it's gospel and it's blessing.

Another way to say it is that if you really want to experience the good news of the gospel, don't be afraid to ask questions about what you read there. And good golly, after reading today's scripture do I have lots of questions.

Why did Jesus lollygag when he knew that Lazarus was sick?

Why did Jesus seem to be surprised...disturbed – to the point of tears – to learn that Lazarus had died when that is what Mary had been trying to tell him?

Could not Jesus – who opened up the eyes of a blind man – have prevented his friend from dying?

And what in the world does Jesus mean when he says “this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it”?

Of all my questions about this passage, it is the last one that really bugs me. It sounds a little too much like “it's just part of God's plan.” Or, “God must be using this to teach us something.”

I guess I can get on board with the fact that the way God works God's purposes out may not make immediate sense to me. And I can understand that there are things that God does need to teach us – some of which have to do with living with the consequences of our bad decisions from time to time. But when it comes to death – especially death from an illness...presumably, something that Lazarus had no control over...I have a hard time believing that this is the way God chooses to work out God's plan or to reveal God's glory.

A friend of mine called my attention to a PBS Frontline program that aired after September 11th called “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero.” The show was a series of interviews of people who had lost or almost lost loved ones in the attack. Some people interpreted their loss as if it were part of God's bigger plan.

But in one interview, the camera turned to an Orthodox rabbi. He said, “I think my job as a rabbi is to help people live with...questions. If God's ways are mysterious, then we have no choice but to live in the mystery. It's upsetting, it's scary, it's painful, it's deep, and it's interesting. But no plan. That's what a mystery is. You want a plan? Talk to me about a plan, but if you're going to tell me how that plan saved you, you'd better be able to tell me how the plan failed to save them.”¹

I have spent 12 years of ministry standing by bedsides and gravesides. Most of us want and need to know that God has a plan that is greater than the pain of a

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/etc/script.html> (with thanks to the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, pastor and author in Northern Virginia)

particular moment or season. And I think that is true – in fact, I am betting my life on it being true.

But where I think we go wrong – and overreach – is when we presume to know – not that God has a plan - but what God’s plan is. That part is the mystery. I do not believe it is ever God’s plan for tragedy, or untimely death – that does not reflect the nature of the God I find in the Scripture or in Jesus Christ.

So perhaps it is enough to say that God works out God’s plan in spite of the obstacles to that plan – whether those obstacles are created by nature, or – as is so often the case – by events that have been set in motion by us.

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Rather than drop what he was doing and go when he heard that Lazarus was sick, Jesus took a breath and set his sights on bringing about the healing of the world.

In John’s gospel, it is this event – the raising of Lazarus – that finally agitates his opponents to the point that it brings about Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

Fred Craddock writes: “Mary and Martha could not know that this act would set in motion the political machinery for Jesus’ death, that Lazarus’ release from the tomb would mean that Jesus would have to enter it.”

But as we read and hear this story, we know:

Jesus crying out...
A tomb near Jerusalem...
A stone that is rolled away...
A body wrapped in grave clothes...
A resurrection...²

We know that this story foreshadows another.

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In an interview recorded a few years ago on *Speaking of Faith* (back when it was still called *Speaking of Faith*), Krista Tippett talked with a Jewish ethicist named Laurie Zoloth about the moral and ethical issues around human cloning. During the interview, Zoloth shared her own experience of being a part of a volunteer Jewish burial society.

Several years earlier, on the Passover, Zoloth was called upon to help with the burial of a young, four year old girl who had been running across the street to her father

² Craddock, Fred, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A* (Trinity Press International, 1993) (per the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana)

when she was struck by car. When Zoloth arrived at the funeral home the women who were preparing the body for burial were, in Zoloth's words, "frantic with grief, [because] we had never helped bury someone so young." And then, the Jewish ethicist who had spoken out against human cloning when on to say, "I knew at that point that I would have cloned her...if I could have, if I had the technology. I didn't care if it was risky, I wanted that baby girl back."

The mother of the little girl, who was a woman of faith, said "if you want to bring my daughter back, I need you to go to work in the world, to do acts of loving kindness and mercy, of justice and love."

It was at that moment that Zoloth realized, in her words, "It is not the body that this little girl needs, it is a world reborn that this little girl needs."³

There is a Hebrew concept for this, which has its origin in the scripture that Jesus studied and knew as the Bible – it is called the Tikkun Olam – which means the "healing of the world." In Jewish theology, it is this healing, this repair of the world, this peace and justice that will bring the Messiah.

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Faced with Lazarus' death, Jesus does grieve. It is important to understand that those tears were real – and real expressions of the kind of friendship and love and loss that Jesus felt as one who was both truly divine and truly human. Yet Jesus also encouraged his followers to trust that through the events that would unfold, they would see the glory of God.

And while, eventually, that does prove to be true, as my friend, The Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana says, what this story also shows us is that when it comes to the glory of God, it is messy.

"The clean and tidy thing would be for God to make sure that nothing bad ever happens to anyone ever again. To step in and not have let Lazarus die. But that's not the way God works, apparently. God apparently wants us to [join him in his] work for the Tikkun Olam. Which is much messier. But the glory of God is messy."⁴

On this day when so many of us bring the memories of those whose lives we treasure, and so many of us carry with us a grief that is still heavy and hard to conceal – know this:

³ Dana (ibid),
(<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/cloning.index.html>)

⁴ The Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, without whom this sermon would not have been written!! (The Well, Austin, TX, 2009)

Through Jesus Christ God has already begun the healing of the world. In his death and resurrection, God has started to give birth to a new world that will reflect the true will of the God who created all things.

Those whom we grieve today see this promise fully. And those of us who are doing the grieving have a way to honor the memory of the ones we love: by committing ourselves to the ongoing work of salvation that takes shape in the everyday ways we choose to follow the one through whom the world is saved.

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