

If You Had Been Here, Lord

This morning, I was seriously tempted to call in sick. Over the course of a week, our little congregation lost three beloved members and learned that a fourth had passed away out of state. The thought of trying to preach about Jesus raising his good friend Lazarus from the dead when so many of our good friends have been taken from us so recently was daunting. This might be a good day just to preach the psalm. But the more I thought about it, the more important it seemed to try to tease out whatever message today's Gospel might have for our grieving community. Let's wrestle with this passage together and see what comfort our Lord might be able to provide.

We know Mary and Martha from our patron Saint Luke's story of how they welcomed Jesus into their home. Martha bustled around preparing an elaborate dinner while Mary sat spellbound at Jesus's feet. When Martha complained, Jesus gently teased her about being "worried and upset about many things." (He undoubtedly meant well but, as any chef can tell you, that fatted calf wasn't going to roast itself.) Thanks to Luke, we know that Jesus has a special friendship with this family. Yet, when Mary and Martha send for Jesus because their brother Lazarus is sick, Jesus drags his feet. By the time he arrives, Lazarus has been dead for four days, long enough that, as Martha so graphically puts it, a "stench" is rising from his tomb. Martha and Mary behaved very differently in Luke's Gospel, but in this passage they greet Jesus with the exact same words: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Anyone who has ever lost a loved one could say the same. "Lord, if you had been here, my sibling, my parent, my spouse, my friend, my child would not have died. *Jesus, where were you?*" The more faith we have in his power to heal, the harder it can be when we beg Jesus for a miracle, and he apparently refuses to help. We've all heard about people who escape death by seemingly miraculous means: people with terminal illnesses that go into remission for no

discernable reason, people who walk away unharmed from shootings, car accidents or plane crashes that should have been fatal. Why them? We wonder. Why them and not my loved one? Why them and not me? Lord, if you had only been here ...

The difficult truth is that there are some things we are simply not given to know. It may sound like a tired cliché, but our Lord truly does work in mysterious ways, and on timelines that don't always make sense to us. We understand terminal illness to be an emergency; why does Jesus wait two whole days before going to his friend? Simple math tells us that Lazarus must have been at the very brink of death when his sisters sent for Jesus, because he's been dead four days when our Lord finally makes his appearance. So, what is our Lord up to here?

Jesus may hope to enlighten the religious leaders who have come from Jerusalem to Mary and Martha's home. Although Jesus has been performing miraculous healings for months, the Pharisees still can't decide who he really is. When Jesus healed the man born blind in last week's passage, some Pharisees argued that he must be a man from God to work such wonders, while others insisted that his powers must come from a demon because he keeps breaking Shabbat. Healing a congenitally blind man isn't enough to make all the Pharisees believe. Jesus probably knows that raising a dead man won't bring them around either, but there's no ambiguity in this healing. Lazarus doesn't just recover from an illness or infirmity. In front of many witnesses, Lazarus returns from the dead when Jesus summons him. Jesus doesn't just do the improbable here – he does the impossible. This is a whole different magnitude of miracle.

But Jesus isn't just using Lazarus and his family to showcase his miraculous powers. He's deeply troubled by what he finds when he finally arrives, sharing in the sisters' grief, weeping with them at the tomb. Our compassionate Lord doesn't distance himself from their pain. He gets down in the tragedy with them and transforms it, putting himself in considerable

jeopardy in the process. This morning's passage ends with John's affirmation that some of the Pharisees saw the resurrected Lazarus and believed in our Lord. If we read on, we would overhear the Sanhedrin in furious debate, terrified that the Romans will destroy their Temple and their nation if too many Hebrews come to believe in Jesus. We would hear Caiaphas, the high priest, argue that it is better "for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Afraid of Roman violence against their flock, the Sanhedrin concocts a plan to put Jesus to death. It's a plan that we know will succeed, at least for a time.

But it's not only fear of Rome that drives the Sanhedrin's plot to assassinate Jesus. Much as any of us might welcome the miraculous healing of a loved one, miracles violate the natural order of the world. We don't understand them, and they frighten us. John's Gospel doesn't say this, but I think we can fairly imagine that many who see Jesus call out the resurrected Lazarus respond not with joyful belief, but with a shiver of superstitious dread.

If God continually tore through the fabric of reality to prevent every tragedy, heal every injury, and right every wrong, there would be chaos, more than our human minds could accept. That's not much comfort to someone mourning the death of a beloved friend or family member, but it may explain why, most of the time, illnesses, injuries and violence produce predictable results. God doesn't push our mortal minds beyond their limits. We grieve for our lost loves, but we don't live in constant anxiety over what incomprehensible thing might happen next.

Jesus shows us that death is not the end, both when he raises Lazarus and when he returns from death himself. He promises that those who believe in him will never die. Scripture bursts with the assurance that death is a transition into a new, beautiful life in the kingdom of heaven. We miss our loved ones terribly when they go, and we can take comfort in Christ's assurance that we'll see them again when we follow them, and him, into the presence of God.

Death comes with certain blessings, though we don't necessarily recognize or welcome them. Even as we look forward to an eternity of joy with our loved ones in the next world, death reminds us that our time together in this world is finite and precious. Jesus's sacrifice of himself is the greatest gift humankind has ever received, and God's gift to us of one another comes a very close second. Death encourages us not to waste a minute on bitter grudges, needless tasks, or empty distractions. We never know which conversation with someone we love might be our last. Death reminds us to make every moment count.

If someone you love passed away before you could resolve an argument or say goodbye, it's not too late to do something about it. I'm convinced that our loved ones can hear us in the kingdom of heaven. Speak aloud all the kind, loving, forgiving things you wish you had said while they were still in this world, and trust God's angels to carry your words to the next one. Better yet, make it a point to resolve unfinished matters in this life whenever you can. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Don't let envy or resentment clutter your heart. Apologize for your mistakes – we all make them – and be quick to forgive when someone apologizes to you. Most important, try never to miss an opportunity to say “I love you.”

Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel wrote, “Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.” Celebrating the people we love throughout the days we share with them can make it a little easier to let them go without shame or regret when their time comes to depart. As we grieve for them, we can trust that Jesus knows and shares in our sorrow. “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus promises, “for they will be comforted.” May his love, and the promise of eternal life, comfort you this day and always. Amen.