

April 10, 2011

Ezekiel 37:1-6; John 11: 1-6, 17, 38-44

As I begin my words today, I'd like us to hear again the place in the story from verses 43 & 44, where Jesus says: "[Lazarus, come out!](#)" (and then it tells us:) [He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave cloths, and with a cloth around his face. Jesus told them: "Untie him, and let him go."](#)

As we've been hearing, this is Lent, a season of extra listening and paying extra attention to God (and this church is doing that in many ways!.... share some)... so really, not just intellectually, but from our hearts too, listen again to what Jesus is remembered to have said: "Come out... untie him *and let him go!*"

One of the memories I am most thankful for, is the memory I have of my growing up years, when my brothers and sister and I were all young enough to be together at family meal time on a somewhat regular basis...

I remember how when my mother had gone to the trouble of preparing a good meal and setting a table for us, that she was pretty strict about people coming to the table when she called. She meant "NOW", not later, when she called us. But my Dad was often slow to arrive. And my mother had little patience for that slow response.

Somehow I think the situation with Lazarus in today's story was different from one in which people are called TO the table. We may have heard that the frequent Biblical image of heaven is that of a great banquet gathering of God's family, to a great banquet table.

So, when Jesus called out to Lazarus, maybe Lazarus was already at the table, in heaven, about to feast with God and the whole family- at the great banquet... but he was being called away from the table. Who knows how he felt about it too.

What is your vision of heaven?

One of mine comes from the words of assurance to the one being crucified with Jesus who- at the last moments of his life asked Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus' response: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Now whatever heaven is like, is not described in that exchange, but it sounds good. And of course, since the specifics about what heaven is actually going to be like are at the most described in various ways- but mostly left open-ended-- we might all have our own ideas about heaven.

I remember once hearing a fable about what heaven and hell are like.

Hell: a limitless banquet table, full of piping hot, succulent and delicious food of every kind... the kind of food that makes your mouth water with eager anticipation. Only everyone at the table is starving to death, because they were tied to the backs of their chairs and held back from the table; and their arms were stretched out and fastened to rods so that they could not bend their elbows to pick up the food and bring it to their mouths to eat.

Heaven: the same scene with all the delicious food... and with the stiff rods tied to

outstretched arms. Only this time, no one is starving. Everybody is feasting in joy, eating their fill. Because they are reaching out and serving each other.

Now, I don't take that parable literally as something that heaven is like. But I do take it literally when it comes to how sometimes even a small change in one's attitude, can make a major difference in the quality of one's life; even in the quality of life in this world-- *and* through eternity.

Do you notice in today's readings how it is with God when it comes to life and death? To us, the difference between life and death might be the biggest difference that could possibly be. But to God, life and death are conditions that are distinguished differently than they may often be from our perspectives.

A valley full of dry bones might be a hopeless scene for us. But to God, it is a scene that can take on new life.

To us a man dead and buried for 4 whole days, already in a state of decomposition, may represent the unavoidable end of life in this world. But to God, even a situation like that can be a time for perceiving God's glorious gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Both life and death are part of life, we often say. It's just that to God, whether there is physical life, or not, *there is still life*. I find that a hopeful thing.

Hopeful both in the case of my loved ones who have died, who I trust are in God's eternal care. Hopeful also in my own case-- so that what is becoming most important to me, is (I pray) not based on life in this world only.] [I find it hopeful and helpful to recognize God's presence in both worlds.

Here's what I mean. If we read the whole story from John 11, we realize that Jesus always intended, and knew, that somehow the death of Lazarus was going to be a glorious thing. From his perspective, this was purely a time of God's glory being revealed.

Here's how Jesus described it to his friends in the story:

"The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory.").

See, he knew that there was still something *glorious* from God going on- even in the midst of what was also a time of loss and terrible sadness.

But the presence of God was not ONLY connected to the sense of God's glory that was to be revealed through the raising of Lazarus. Can you recognize why I say that?

Here is a hint: it's one of the reasons, in response to our children's questions about 'where's God when there's a tsunami?', that we often try to explain how God is with the ones who are hurting, who are suffering, or are lost.] [

Remember how it is described in the story? Jesus comes to the home of Lazarus, who has already died and been buried. He knows what he is going to do, and how God's glory will be revealed. He even talks to Mary and Martha about the life of God- eternal life- that is right there with them. →

One of the first things he says when he talks with Martha is "your brother will rise to life."

We can see how Jesus comes to this grieving family knowing full well what he is going to do. But... he is also so much with them in what they are going through, (with them in what they are feeling)- that he weeps with them.] [

There may be times in our lives (there will be) when there is a season of grieving, weeping. But this is one of the places in the Bible that shows us that by faith in God through Jesus Christ, we are assured that we never weep alone.

Last week at my discussion group, someone asked the question: "Did Lazarus want to come back, or did he have to?" I've been thinking about that and reflecting on the image of a great heavenly banquet- an eternal feast- as I've been pondering this reading for today's worship service.

Imagine with me for a moment if you will the most delicious banquet you could possibly dream up.

What would you include? Wonderful things like...

- Lots of chocolate chip cookies & milk!
- Some of the amazing razor clam recipes, salmon or halibut dishes I've come to know since moving here.
- Servings of the yummy cake I can remember from my grandmother's house-- but that (even though we have the recipe) has never tasted quite so good since. Naturally there will be some of those foot-long Cheese steaks I can remember (and try to have whenever visiting my family in Eastern Pennsylvania).

Can we picture Lazarus at the heavenly banquet? Maybe looking at a steaming cheese-steak with grilled onions... ...did he want to come out, or would he have rather stayed??

Who really "knows"? I mean we know about how people sometimes say after a near-death experience, that they felt so bathed in love and light, that as they were resuscitated (brought back to life) they didn't want to come back-- but who really knows what heaven is like.?

The thing is, a person may not always be feasting at a heavenly banquet when called back to life by our Lord. That might be an awareness that can help us during Lent- or at any time.

As you can tell from my dream about the heavenly feast, sometimes what people might feast on can be far from healthy- far from good for us. I'm talking about a meal that can be made up of things that might seem delicious to us at the time, but will cause terrible digestion problems later.

The kind of meal that can consume a person, as well as be consumed.

People can make a feast out of various things.

A main course of revenge. A side order of long-time grudge. Some judgmental gossip for dessert. And all washed down with a focus on self... on a me-first attitude that believes that what it means to be happy has most of all, to do with me and my way... instead of the way of

life from God that leads to love for others.

That kind of feasting might at times tempt us to over-eat, but it is never going to be good for us either.

It's sort of like what Frederick Beuchner wrote in his book "Wishful Thinking- a Theological ABC" under the heading, "Anger"¹ [

(Beuchner describes a 'self-devouring' kind of Anger)

"Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--- in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

I don't know about everybody else, but I've discovered that I don't always avoid eating a meal like that.

So I have to remember that the human need for *life*, never ends. But listen (Lent is a season of Spiritual growth that is all about listening and it's hard to not become a little dramatic about it). ... So, let us Listen... there is a voice... still calling us out of a tomb.

And even if some self-destructive things can get to feeling so familiar to us, that we sometimes lose our appetites for a healthier feast... **listen...** because-- it can be our names we hear spoken by the one who is with us when we weep, and when we laugh, and even when we wonder if we have lost our way.

It's the season for it. And our invitation is: Listen... because we're being summoned to a perfectly set table full of the most delicious food, prepared for us with love and care.

God has something delicious cooked up for us, and we are all invited to the table. Let's not be late.

Let us pray:

Help us to eat well at the table you have prepared for us, O God-- in this life... and in the life to come through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

"This Is My Song" 437

1 Beuchner, Frederick, Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 2