



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MINISTER
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Fifth Sunday in lent
March 9, 2008

Psalm 130
John 11:1-45

Unbound and Set Free

There is a hilarious story, I don't know if it's true or not, about the Pillsbury Dough Boy and how he is responsible for attempted murder. Apparently, a woman in Arkansas put her groceries in the backseat of her car and just as she had fastened her seatbelt and started the engine, she heard a loud bang, and instantly felt a sharp pain in the back of her neck. The woman jumped out of her car, holding her hands on the back her head, shouting, "Help! I've been shot! Help!" A friendly stranger approached and not seeing anyone in the car or anywhere near the woman, he tried to persuade her to move her hands so he could investigate the wound. But the woman clenched her head, "I can't move my hands, my brain is falling out - I can feel it!" As it turns out, it wasn't her brain she was holding in - it was a chunk of Pillsbury dough. It was so hot in Arkansas that day - when the woman put her groceries in her car, a Pillsbury biscuit canister exploded from the back seat, making a loud, popping explosion as it shot the dough into the back of the woman's head.

How real it is, though, in our society, to hear a loud sharp noise, feel something hit you, and instantly assume you have been shot and you're dying. The idea of sudden death is not so far fetched in our minds. Even our young people understand that there is life and there is death. In fact, one little boy was sitting in church one day and the preacher was going on and on about how great heaven would be. He talked about the streets of gold and the angels and about seeing God face to face. He concluded his message by asking the members of the congregation, "you want to go heaven, don't you?" Everyone answered with positive acclamation except for the little boy. He just sat there looking scared. So, the preacher bent down and asked, "Son, don't you want to go to heaven one day?" Looking a bit more relieved, the boy answered, "Well sure, one day I do. But I thought your were getting up a load to go right now!"

It is true that death is not often taken lightly. We don't like to think about, let alone talk

about it. Like Mary, Martha, and Jesus, when death confronts our everyday lives.. it stirs a very deep emotion within us. Maybe it's the reality that we will no longer see a loved one.. or the mystery behind not knowing exactly what will happen to us when our heart stops beating. The fact is, we are uncomfortable with the unknown, and we squirm at the thought of not having full control over our living.

Jesus too, had friends, people he loved and grew fond of spending time with. Mary and Martha's brother, Lazarus, was one such person in Jesus' life. And when word gets to Jesus that Lazarus has taken ill, we can imagine that he is concerned. Yet he doesn't feel the need to rush out right away, because he knows that God will be glorified through Lazarus' illness. (Now, as a side note, let us remember that Jesus is divine, one with God; Jesus' ability to attribute an illness to a divine revelation is his power alone, not something in which we are capable). So when Jesus profoundly confesses, "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;" We can be assured that Jesus is about to reveal a little bit more about his identity as the Son of God. Let's hear that again, "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." Obviously, something powerful is about to happen.

Lazarus dies. The town is in mourning, a loved one has been lost and death shines its ugly little head once more. Jesus makes his way to the city, but before he arrives, he is met by Martha. "Lord, if you had been here,

my brother would not have died." It's not an attempt to blame Jesus for the death of Lazarus, it's a bold confession of belief - that Jesus has the power to conquer death. Martha's grief over the loss of her brother was sincere and deep and filled with hope and trust - that death was not the last word. But her sister Mary was not quite as confident. Death has that ability to stir us - we can't stop it, we can't control it, we can't even predict it, we can simply wrestle with its loss as it takes one away from us. And for Mary, that loss was hard to swallow. She wanted to believe that her brother would live again, yet, her tears of sadness would not stop. The mystery of death was too much - the unknown was unbearable. Jesus looked around and he saw the tears and he understood the emotions and he was deeply moved.

Now, we have to remember, Jesus held deep knowledge; that belief in God brought a new kind of living, one that would never be stopped by the pains of death. If only the people could understand, their pain would be softened, their tears would be tears mixed with loss and joy. Jesus was in a tough spot. He knew both sides - he knew the glory and he knew the pain. And so, overcome with emotion, most likely by a culmination of his own love for Lazarus, the sadness of his friends, and his desire for the people to grasp the depth of what God was doing - Jesus did what became the shortest verse in the bible, "Jesus began to weep," "Jesus wept."

Our Lord Jesus, cried tears just like our own. He understood our pain. And while many were moved by this very human

display of emotion, others mocked his tears, “couldn’t he have stopped it all in the first place - he says he is one with God, then why didn’t he save Lazarus from dying?” Isn’t that exactly the way we humans are? Someone we love dies and rightly so, we wish some miracle could happen - that God would somehow save this one, bring them back to life so we could selfishly have them to ourselves again. We say we believe the good news of life over death, yet we struggle to let our loved ones go. It’s a selfishness, yes, but it’s also very real, a very honored human emotion - because it comes from love and God understands it.

Many of you know that a very dear friend of mine, Earl, died this past December; he died of cancer at the age of 42. Earl was one of those people that touched so many lives with his awesome, loving, and energetic spirit. I can’t tell you how many times Earl kept me on the right path, always encouraging me to use my God-given gifts for the good of this amazing world in which God entrusted to us. Earl’s death still stings. Knowing that I can’t pick up the phone and call him, knowing my email’s will never be returned, and knowing that many current students at the college where he taught are left with a huge void in their classrooms - it stings and it’s hard to accept. We all know that feeling, “No, please Lord, let this one not die, don’t make me deal with this pain!” Yet, it is real - it is true. Earl and many others we hold dear in this sanctuary today, are no longer alive in the flesh. They no longer live & breath among us. And that’s the very emotion Jesus wept over. His eyes welled with tears because he was sad at the

loss so many people were feeling, and he cried, because he wanted badly for the people to understand and take comfort.

Jesus knew he had to prove God’s power, its what he came to earth to do. And so he called the dead man out of the tomb, and as Lazarus walked out, wrapped in the cloth of death, Jesus made it clear, “Unbind him, and let him go.” In other words, death binds him no more - through the gift of Jesus Christ, God claims the life of Lazarus and of each and every one of us, and we are set-free... to live.

Jesus knew the death of a loved one was something very difficult to grasp and live with. And so he did something powerful. “... even though they die, (they) will live.... Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” My friends, it’s not the miracle of this story that has lasting significance; it’s the truth - that the power of death, that power that works to remove us from life with God, that power is forever defeated. It is no longer a promise that God will bring new life to those that live in the light of Christ, it’s now a reality; that death is resurrected to life, as Jesus Christ establishes salvation for the world.

When my friend Earl died, many, many people were affected by his loss - and a tribute was set up on the college web-site. Many of us have written our final thoughts on a life well lived, but one of the contributions has really helped me... it was written by one of my religion professors... he used the image of a tapestry. That on one side you see the artisans magnificent plan,

but when you turn it over, you see nothing but confounding senselessness. The back side of the tapestry is withering hurt, pain, disease, and great loss. Yet, just flip it over.. And there it is... the dream, hope, inspiration, and beauty right there for the world to see and understand. One side is ugly, and the other is beautiful and magnificent, and through it all, God has been the artist. The struggle is apparent, but the light of the resurrected life is so much more visible.

That’s what Jesus did in the Lazarus story. He took illness, sorrow, and death, and he turned it into life, and hope for the world. And as we begin to understand the profound reality of the power of God in life over death - we will truly live in the good news; that as the ugliness of death tries to separate us from God - we are unbound - and we are set-free - to live - not for death, but for life. Now and Forevermore. Praise be to God. Amen.