

the difference



John 11:38-44

Dead Man Walking

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter James
John 11:38-44

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I had a flashback this week to something that happened years ago sparked by this John 11 passage. Our son, Andrew, was in middle school and daughter, Emily, was in elementary school. A family with children the age of our kids invited us for dinner. We gathered around their dinner table. The dad explained their tradition of reciting a Bible verse from memory prior to the meal. This caught our unsuspecting family off-guard. Chris and I searched our memory banks for a passage to share. Emily was young, so she received a pass but Andrew's participation was clearly expected. I noticed his pained expression gave way to a smile. When it came time for our ever-resourceful son to participate, he recited a verse from today's passage, "Jesus wept." Nice recovery! It's the shortest verse in the Bible. Actually, it rivals one other verse from Thessalonians, "Rejoice always" (5:16). This two-word verse has much to teach us, but first the story.



Mary and Martha, along with their brother, Lazarus, live in Bethany. Lazarus has become seriously ill. The sisters send word to Jesus, who is teaching 20 miles away near the Jordan River: "Lord, the one whom you love is ill" (11:3).

Jesus' response to this news is curious: "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" (11:4). Lazarus' sickness will not *ultimately* end in death. It will lead to resurrection. The glory Jesus references in this passage will be the revelation of his identity as sent from God.

You might expect Jesus to drop what he is doing to come to the aid of his friend. Instead, John tells us in verse six, “When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed put two more days” (11:6). What’s up with that? Perhaps he delays his visit for strategic reasons. Just you wait and see.

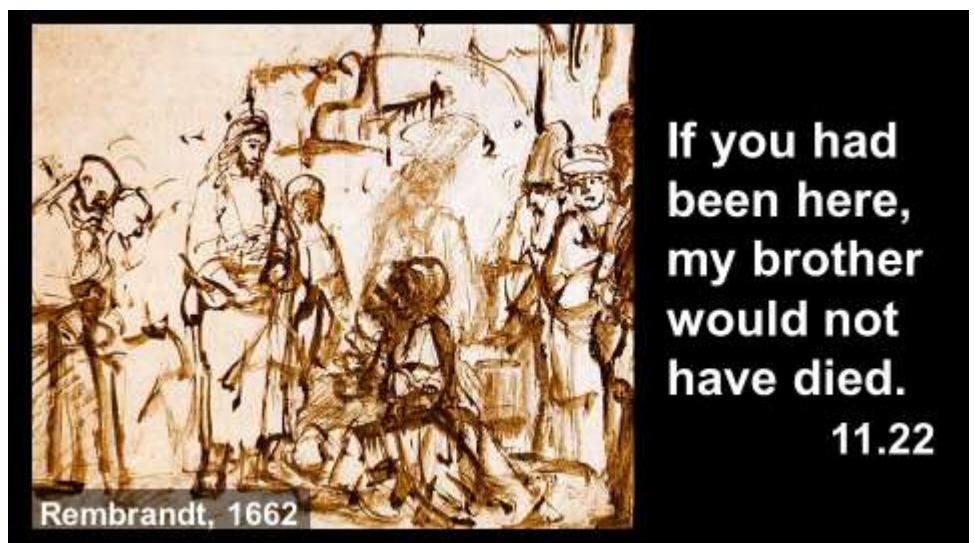
When Jesus announces it is time to go to Bethany, his disciples initially balk. Bethany’s proximity to Jerusalem puts them at serious risk. Jesus tells them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going to awaken him” (11:11). His disciples interpret Jesus’ words in literal fashion, “Lord, if he is sleeping, he will recover” (11:13). Let me explain something, Jesus tells them in so many words, “Lazarus is dead” (11:14).

By the time they arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead four days (11:17). In those days, people believed the soul hovered near a body for three days after death. The soul departs for good on the fourth day so Lazarus is now long gone.

Martha greets Jesus with the words, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:22). I can’t quite read the tone of her

question. Is she grief-stricken or disappointed? Am I the only one who thinks she may be angry as in “Where the hell have you been?”

Jesus announces, “Your brother will rise again” (11:23). Martha replies, “I know that he will rise again in the



resurrection on the last day” (11:24). The Jews believed in a general resurrection on the final day when the Messiah appears. Jesus shifts the focus from an abstract resurrection to the immediate. “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26).

“Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” Martha answers (11:27). For all the confusing statements uttered by people concerning Jesus’ identity in the gospels, Martha nails it.



Martha exits to find Mary, who greets Jesus with the exact words as her sister, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died”

(11:33). The only difference is the emotion Mary brings to the table. Jesus is moved to tears. I mentioned earlier the Bible’s shortest verse. Well, here it is, “Jesus wept” (11.35).

Jesus and the sisters go to Lazarus’ tomb. Jesus orders the stone rolled away. Martha offers a mild protest. After four days, the odor will be pungent. I much prefer the original King James version, “Lord, by this time, he stinketh” (11:39). Jesus reminds Martha, “Didn’t I tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (11:40).

John records Jesus’ prayer in this moment: “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of this crowd, so that they may believe that you sent me” (11:42). Jesus’ prayer serves

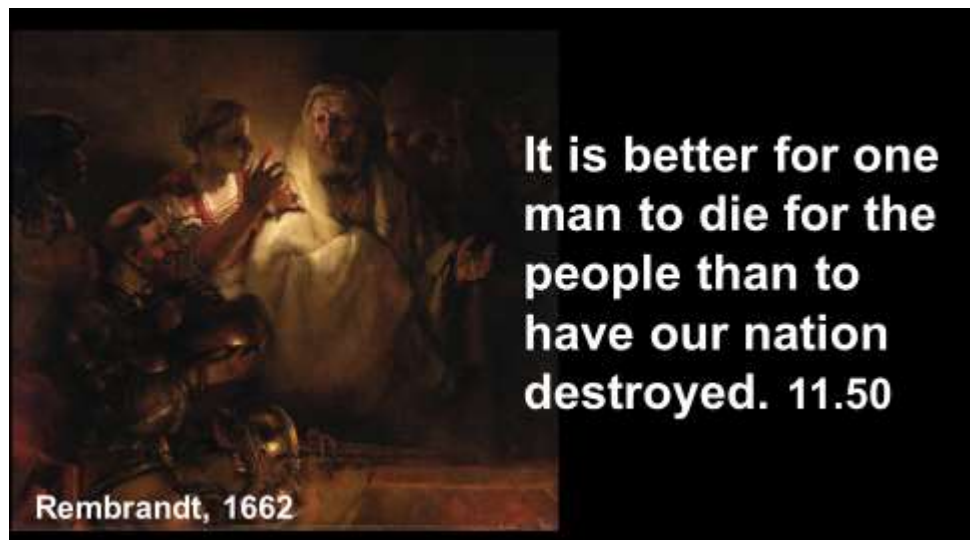
to draw his hearers into the intimacy Jesus shares with God the Father.

The miracle itself occupies all of two verses: “Lazarus, come out!” (11:43). Lazarus shuffles out, bound in grave clothes. “Untie him and set him free” (11:44).

Some of the eyewitnesses believe in Jesus. Others beat a hasty retreat to tell the religious authorities about all that is going down. I interpret their actions as malicious since the Pharisees are well-known enemies of Jesus.

The Pharisees call an emergency session of the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body in Jerusalem. Panic sets in. “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy our temple and nation” (11:48). Any popular uprising by a messianic leader could result in swift action by the authorities.

Caiaphas, the high priest, offers his two cents, “It is better to have one man die for the people than to have our



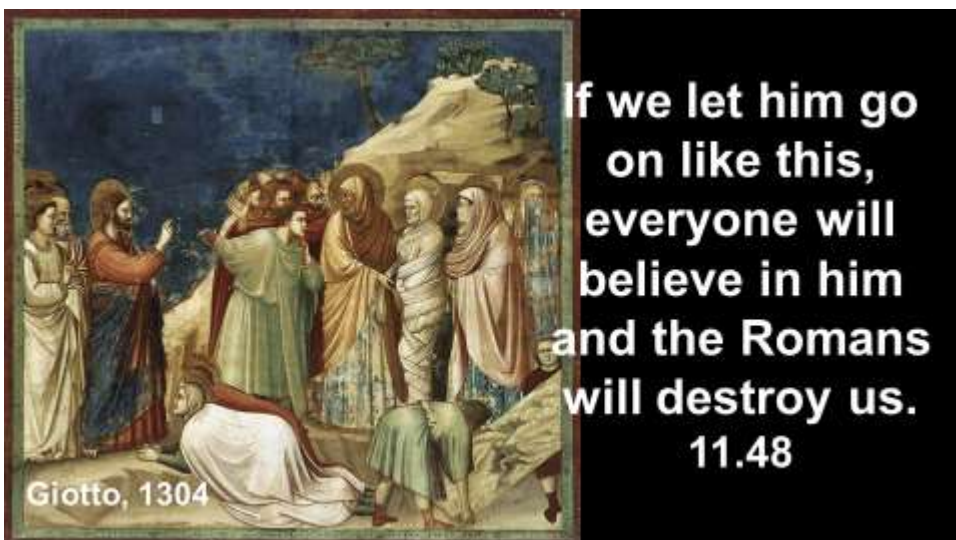
whole nation destroyed” (11:50). Talk about irony! Little does Caiaphas know that Jesus will soon die as an atoning sacrifice for his people! Our story closes with their resolve to look for a way to arrest Jesus.

John calls Jesus’ miracles *signs*. There are seven such signs in the first half of John’s gospel. Each sign points to Jesus’ identity and mission. John begins with a sign at a wedding and closes with a sign at a funeral. In this final sign,

Jesus gives life itself. Life is his quintessential sign. “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

This shortest verse intrigues me. There are several possibilities for why Jesus wept, all of which may be in play here. First, Jesus weeps for his friend Lazarus. Even though he is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus does not take suffering lightly. His empathy is striking. Second, Jesus weeps for the calamity and carnage created by sin. Sin exerts a terrible toll on humanity. It separates us from God and this separation ultimately leads to death. Paul writes in Romans, “The wages of sin is death” (6:23). Third, Jesus weeps because of his premonition that raising Lazarus will hasten his own death. More irony! Jesus’ act of giving life to his friend Lazarus will set into motion events that will lead to his own death. Jesus practices what he will preach later in John: “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13).

Jesus’ words and actions result in a division of the house among people in our story. Some believe; others become fearful. The fear spreading through the Sanhedrin is palpable: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our temple and our nation” (11:48). Score one for panic. They are afraid for their social standing and their jobs. They view Jesus as a competitor. Anxiety causes people to do strange things.



Consider the 14th century fresco by the Italian painter Giotto de Bondone. Some of you will like this 14th century

painting; others of you will find it eerie. Look at the emotion conveyed through facial expressions. Jesus' determined countenance focuses on Lazarus who, understandably looks like death warmed over. Mary and Martha are kneeling at Jesus' feet. The disciples to Jesus' left look hopeful and expectant. Notice the figures to Jesus' right. Let's zoom in on them with raised hands and anxious countenance. They convey fear and panic.

This painting sums it up well. Some people fall at Jesus' feet and follow him. Others become afraid of what will happen if they give their lives to Jesus and turn away.



The opposite of faith in Scripture is not doubt; it is fear. The Bible is loaded with admonitions not to fear. My devotional readings have been in Isaiah this past week. “Do not fear” is everywhere in Isaiah. Look at the verses I came across in a span of four chapters. “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God” (41:10). “Do not fear, I will help you” (41:12). “Little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you” (41:14). “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you” (43:1). “Do not be afraid, for I am with you” (43:5). “Do not be afraid, my servant” (44:2). “Do not tremble, do not be afraid” (44:8).

In the last few weeks, I have traveled more than usual to Los Angeles, lovely Youngstown, Ohio, and Boston. In every city I visited, people greeted me with the same question. What is the mood in Washington right now after the election? I supplied a one-word answer to everyone: anxious. People in our metro area, regardless of how they voted, are anxious. Well before the election, half of

Americans indicated the presidential election was causing them significant stress. This anxiety has carried over into 2017. Pro-Trump supporters are anxious about what diversification will mean for our country. Anti-Trump people are anxious about what health care changes or immigration policies will do to our country. We Americans are a rather anxious bunch, so this recent wave of political drama has everyone amped-up right about now.

Take a deep breath. Turn off the news, especially if you are digesting a steady diet of it and open the Good Book. Do not feed your fears. Read Isaiah 40-45 this week. Isaiah delivers this prophecy when it looks as though the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Come on, Christians! We know how the story will end. It may appear the devil is having a field day, but God will prevail. I am reminded of something Robert Browning wrote back in 1841, “God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.”

Believe is an indispensable word in John’s gospel. *Believe* equates to trust. Trust God. Trust Jesus. “God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.”

DO NOT FEAR

Do not fear I am with you 41.10

Do not fear I will help you 41.12

Do not fear I myself will help you 41.14

Do not fear for I have redeemed you 43.1

Do not fear for I am with you 43.5

Do not be afraid, my servant 44.2

Do not tremble, do not be afraid 44.8