A Certain Man - John 11:1-45, 5 Lent, March 2023 - Pastor Phil Wold, Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

“Now a certain man was ill. . .”

Isn’t that a fascinating way to start this wonderful story?

A certain man - Just some guy.

Perhaps John is setting us up here with that “certain man” stuff.

In the next few verses, we will learn that this “certain man” has some pretty deep ties to Jesus. In fact, Jesus seems to have a deep relationship with his entire family.

Just two verses after that “certain man” comment, John tells us that “the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.””

Many scholars understand that when the Gospel of John refers to the “Beloved Disciple” the author is referring to himself… But here the sisters of Lazarus are pretty sure that Lazarus is the one beloved by Jesus.

Could it be, that the “Beloved Disciple” - is not the author of the Gospel, but Lazarus? Interesting.

The one whom Jesus loved is mentioned 6 times in the Gospel of John, and not once in the other 3 Gospels. This character - “the Beloved Disciple” - is in the midst of the story, and seems to be quite important. He was sitting at Jesus’ side at the last Supper. At the cross he was standing by Jesus’ mother, as Jesus said: ““Woman, behold your son.” “Behold your mother.”

The identity of “the Beloved Disciple” may be a bit of an academic question, but it seems important to the way John tells the story of Jesus.

Here is another suggestion for the identity of the Beloved Disciple. Each and every one of you is Jesus’ Beloved Disciple. You are one beloved by God through Jesus Christ.

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Our Gospel reading today begins:

 “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany.” -

Lazarus, Jesus’ family friend, this beloved one, was ill. In fact, he is more than ill. He is sick unto death - and there will be conversation, there will be an amazing claim: “I am the resurrection and the life.” There will be a wonderful promise: “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” There will be the mystery of Jesus weeping, and there will be an unforgettable scene at a tomb.

We are in the eleventh chapter of John, and we are hearing intimations of the cross and the resurrection.

As the story moves along in the following chapters, it will become clear that Jesus giving this gift of life to Lazarus causes the powers that be to conclude that Jesus is - in reality - working death in the world.

They are afraid Jesus is a threat to their religious order - a threat to the accommodations that must be made with the powers of Rome - and, so, this action by Jesus for his friend Lazarus will be the end of him. It will be the end of Jesus, we know, and yet, Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb gives a hint of where the whole Gospel of John is taking us…

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus - -“

We’ve all known the pain and sorrow of Lazarus’ family. The loss of someone dear. The deep sadness of broken dreams. The foreboding that comes with a bad diagnosis, the threat of violence, the peril of financial uncertainty.

The idea of Lazarus as the Beloved Disciple gives interesting insight into the life of our Lord… It suggests that Jesus had this one, great, very close friend. And this close friendship spilled over into a love for his whole family. (John 11 verse 5 tells us Jesus loved Martha and Mary.) It might be interesting to know if, years earlier, if Jesus wept when their mother died. There might be stories untold, of how when the mother of Mary, Martha and Lazarus died, Jesus brought over a hot dish, and just sat with them, and told stories about when they were little. The idea of Jesus having this family of deep friendship seems almost surprising and comforting and maybe even fun…

And this close relationship explains that touching passage... that well known and shortest of verses. “Jesus wept.”

Of course we miss that in our translation of verse 35 which reads:

“Jesus began to weep”.

We miss that in our translation, it is so much less poetic. Let us note that there is something else most all of us miss in this translation.

John tells us of the tears of the others in verse 31 and 33 - There he uses a word that is something we don’t really know much about in our culture. It is the ritual wailing of people preparing for a funeral. A ritual act, to seek to express the sadness that is felt in the community.

In contrast, in verse 35, the word that names the weeping of Jesus - - is the more spontaneous cry of one encountering deep loss. The tears we shed at the loss of our beloved. The tears we cry at the many graves we encounter in our lives. The loss of loved ones, to be sure. The entombment of hopes and dreams. The struggles encountered in the sadness of addiction. The pain of illness. The lostness we feel in the face of loneliness. The hurts we bear. And sometimes more painfully - the hurts we cause. The ways our present situation threatens our future.

You’ve heard those words. - The words spoken by Martha and then by Mary:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

You’ve spoken them too. . . “If only…”

“If only we could go back in time.”

“If only we knew..”

“If only…”

Along with Mary and Martha, it would only make sense to conclude that death and decay have the final word in our world.

It’s enough to make anyone weep…

Yet, here the story gets oh-so-wonderful. - “I am the resurrection and the life” Jesus has told Martha - and we have listened in. . .

Now -the most amazing of things - Lazarus will hear Jesus too.

Lazarus - in the tomb four days - having died, and given in to decay. Having lost all and come to the very end and beyond - Lazarus hears the voice of Jesus as Jesus calls to him...

“LAZARUS, COME OUT!”

A simple Word and a simple call: “Lazarus, come out”.

“Lazarus”

“Leave that grave."

“Leave death behind.”

The strong and terrible and heart-rending word of death and decay are not the final word. They are not the most potent powers in the world.

They are no match for the Word of God.

Contrary to what we have thought; death and decay are not as all powerful as they seem.

Lazarus knows this like no one before him.

He has heard the Word, and it has called him forth from the tomb.

“Come out!”

“Come out from that tomb.”

“Leave death behind.”

“Step out - blinking in the light of God’s love and life. God has heard your cry. God has seen your tears. God will comfort you in your weeping, God will wipe every tear from your eyes.”

“LAZARUS, COME OUT!”

A certain man - the beloved disciple - Jesus’ great friend.

A certain man - a certain woman - a certain little child - YOU oh Beloved Disciple!

The story we are all so sure is the only story there is - the story that death is the strongest of forces. This story is turned on its head. Death shall rule over you no more. The grave is not your final resting place. Like Lazarus, you’ve already been there, and you’ve been called out from the tomb - and set loose on the world. Amen