

Pastor Joe Polzin  
 John 11:17-27, 38-53  
 “God’s Greater Plan”  
 Year A – Fifth Sunday in Lent  
 March 29, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

As we have heard the past few Sundays in this season of Lent, we again hear a longer story from the Gospel of John, as Jesus interacts with a variety of people throughout his ministry. It’s likely many of us are familiar with this account today from John’s Gospel, the death and resurrection of Lazarus. But what is particularly meaningful in this passage, especially as we consider our own current situation today, is the way we think about and understand God’s greater plan, especially as it unfolds in our Gospel Reading.

It starts at the beginning of the chapter, when John reminds us that the three siblings, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, all lived in Bethany, and they were the close friends of Jesus. But Lazarus becomes sick. And so the sisters send word to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3). And it’s such an understated request, yet one I’m sure we’ve all prayed in our own lives. Scripture tells us to pray for the sick and the distressed, and to trust that God will not only hear our prayers, but also that he will provide an answer.

And Jesus does answer this prayer, but we should take notice of what he says. He responds to the news, likely talking to his disciples around him, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4). Now, what Jesus says, if we take it at face value, can be confusing. You might assume Jesus gets the facts wrong about Lazarus. This illness will result in his death. He was really going to die and be dead for four days in the tomb before Jesus even gets there. So, why did Jesus say what he says?

Well, of course, Jesus *knows* Lazarus is going to die. In fact, he’s the one who has to clarify with his disciples that when he refers to Lazarus having fallen asleep, he means that Lazarus actually died (11:11-14). Rather, when Jesus says, “This illness does not lead to death,” he’s referring to what the end result of the illness is going to be, its purpose, its ultimate goal. This illness will *cause* Lazarus to die, obviously, but it does not *lead* to death, as if death was going to be the last word. And then Jesus tells his disciples what the last word is going to be: “It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

And it’s for that reason that Jesus answers Mary and Martha’s prayer the way he does. They asked him to come right away because they knew he could heal Lazarus. But Jesus doesn’t. In fact, he delays two more days before he even leaves for Bethany. The plan they wanted was for him to come right at that moment, but Jesus’ plan was something else.

Now, I’ve heard some Christians talk about “unanswered prayers,” that they are a challenge we have to deal with in our faith, the times when God doesn’t answer our prayers. But I disagree with that. God *always* provides an answer to our prayers. Rather, it’s challenging when the answer that God provides is not the answer we were looking for. And not only that, but when the answer God provides makes absolutely no sense to us at all.

You can hear both Martha and Mary struggling with that, and it’s evident in their first words they say to Jesus. Both of them, right out of the gate, obviously grieving that Jesus didn’t intervene earlier when Lazarus was sick, said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). Which was absolutely true. They weren’t necessarily blaming

Jesus, they were just speaking the truth. If Jesus had been present, then Lazarus could have easily been healed of his life-threatening condition. Which is why, when Jesus was asked to come right away, his answer was the opposite. Because Jesus had a different plan. He had a greater plan.

His plan was to show that death was *not* the end, that this illness wasn't going to end with death, but rather with something far greater, and the Son of God would be glorified by it. His plan is even evident in the way that he talks about Lazarus' death from the beginning, saying that he had "fallen asleep" (11:11). And his well-known words with Martha, words that we hear at all our funerals, speaks to the truth that, for those who are in Christ, death is *not* our end either. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (11:25-26).

But again, consider the plan. In order for God's plan to be fulfilled, in order for the Son of God to be glorified, in order for those around him to believe that God sent Jesus to do the Father's will (11:23), Lazarus first had to die. Which isn't something for us to consider lightly. Suffering and death, and the sorrow caused by that separation, and the grief that afflicts us are all things that are truly painful in our lives. And it was for them, as well.

Martha is struggling with the thing she believes is true, which is the resurrection from the dead she knows is coming on the last day, yet at the same time having to cope with the loss of her brother in the present. Mary can only fall at Jesus' feet, weeping. The Jews who surrounded the family were comforting them as best as they knew how, but they too were weeping. Even Jesus, John says, was "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled" (11:33), and he too "wept" (11:35).

Think about that. The Lord of life, the Resurrection and the Life, still knows what it's like to feel the sorrow of death, the effects of this sinful and fallen world, and he knows our pain. Weeping and grieving do not show a lack of faith. It shows a recognition of the pain that sin has caused in such a situation. And even Jesus, who knew perfectly the plan of God, and was the one putting it all into action, still knew and felt this.

God's plan does not happen according to our wisdom or our reason. It can often include hardship and difficulty, which we would try to avoid at all costs. That's why God's plan often doesn't make sense to us. In fact, we might think that his plan at times makes no sense at all. I'm sure that's what Martha and Mary were thinking. Why wouldn't Jesus have come earlier and done something differently?

God's plan can include the sorrow and suffering of this world. It's not that God causes sorrow and suffering. Those are caused as a result of our sin, and the sin and evil that persist in this fallen world. That's the way it's been since the Fall. But God's plan is so comprehensive, so powerful, so almighty, that not even our sin and its grievous effects are outside of God being able to use them for his good. And so, when we pray to God, we always pray knowing that he will hear and answer our prayer, and he will do so in the way that he knows is best for us. The way that is according to his plan.

The other thing we must realize is that God's plan is not just a series of small events that, hopefully, in the end, come together somehow and someday. No, God foreknew everything that has happened or will happen, and so he operates according to his infinite wisdom and providence. Which means, since the first day of creation until the world is re-created on the last day, we are all taking part in his divine story, his divine plan. God is not surprised by anything.

This, too, we see play out in John chapter 11, where God's plan wasn't only that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, but that miracle was going to be part of something much greater. Raising Lazarus was significant, and it show us, as it showed them, that Jesus does

indeed have the authority over death; that he indeed is the Resurrection and the Life; that Lazarus was not only going to be raised in the resurrection on the last day, but, to everyone's surprise, he was going to be raised on that particular day, as well. But God's greater plan also included what happened immediately after the miracle, which John makes sure to tell us.

The result of Lazarus being raised from the dead was that many people began to believe in Jesus. And word about that got back to the Pharisees, chief priests, and the council, who began to worry and say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (11:48). To which Caiaphas, the high priest, unwittingly prophesied, "It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (11:50). He said this because from that moment on, they would make their plans to put Jesus to death. But what Caiaphas failed to recognize was that he was also a part in God's greater plan.

And God's plan was this, that the miracle in Bethany, the resurrection of Lazarus, would actually lead directly to Jesus' death. The religious leaders decided they could no longer let things continue the way they were. They viewed Jesus as too dangerous and too influential. It set off a chain reaction of events, the events of Holy Week, which led to Jesus' betrayal, arrest, suffering, crucifixion, and then death. Jesus had said that Lazarus' illness wouldn't lead to death, but what he didn't say was that God's greater plan would *involve* two deaths along the way, including his own.

That's why the miracle with Lazarus opens our eyes to see more fully the way in which God works. Not only did Jesus have something greater in store for Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus, to show his glory and to show that he has power over death, but Jesus also knew that it would imminently lead to his own death. However, like Lazarus, death would not be the end of Jesus. His dying also had a purpose. It would lead to the Son of God being glorified in an even greater way.

Caiaphas' words would come true. One man would die for the people, so that our sins could be forgiven, and so that we, the people of God, would never perish. And what's more, Jesus was also going to be raised from the dead so that we could not only receive the perfect sacrifice for our sins by his holy and precious death, but also be assured by his resurrection that we too will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus' death and resurrection definitively shows us that God can take the worst of human sin, and suffering, and the pain of death, that he can use things we may not ever desire or want, that he can do something which makes no sense to us at all, and it's all part of his perfect and gracious plan. And in the end, even if we're never able to see the reason why, we know all things happen for our eternal good.

This is what I've been thinking about recently in my own life. My dad fell asleep in the Lord last month. And he was initially diagnosed with brain cancer two years ago. And during those two years, we certainly did a lot of praying. A lot of conversations with God about what his plan was. Now the thing about a diagnosis like brain cancer, as with other diseases, is that nowadays we have so much information, so many statistics about possible outcomes, and treatment probabilities, and life expectancy, that if you're not careful, it can quickly become so mathematical, so cut-and-dry, so logical.

From the beginning my family always knew the odds. We knew what the medical science said was eventually going to happen. And that was helpful to the extent that we were well informed and not surprised by how this particular disease behaved. It helped us have realistic expectations. But it didn't stop us from praying for something different. For those two years, we

still prayed for a miracle. And we knew that, if a miracle were to happen, we were looking in the right place. We were asking God, who we knew could heal my dad in an instant if that was his will, just like Jesus could have healed Lazarus if he had been by his side. But like Martha and Mary, we also realized that whatever happened, miracle or not, it would be according to God's plan.

Now, I can't say I fully understand why God allowed everything with my dad to happen the way it did. He hasn't told me that, and I don't expect I'll ever truly know. But I do know this. Even if I don't understand, what God shows me is that his plan is greater than what I can see and what I can know. And it's comforting to know that. It doesn't mean things were easy for us, or that they weren't painful, or that it isn't tragic. But it does mean that not even losing my dad to cancer is outside of God's greater plan. And we know what the purpose of that plan is: it's for the glory of God, and it's so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

God delivered saving faith to my dad in his baptism. My dad had been claimed by God as one of his children. His sins were crucified with Christ and he was raised in faith to newness of life. Jesus' words—"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die"—those words about my dad, and about everyone who believes in Jesus. And while I may not understand God's plan right now, I can confidently confess with Martha that Jesus is the "Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world," and that Jesus will raise her, and Mary, and Lazarus, and me, and my dad, and all his saints, on the last day.

You see, we may not know all of God's plan, but we do know the ending. And when it comes to this world—the diseases, the pain, the suffering, and the things that we just won't ever be able to fully wrap our minds around—we can still know, if I may paraphrase Jesus' words, that "these things do not lead to our death." They are all for the glory of God and for his Son. And because we have been saved by God's Son, everything that happens is for our eternal glory, as well.

This world thinks of death as the worst possible outcome, the end of the road, the thing we must avoid at all costs. But that's not how Christians see it. Jesus tells us today that, for those who believe in him, death is only one small step on the journey he has planned for us. That because of Jesus, death is but our door to eternal life. That even if we die, which someday we will, yet shall we live. Which then allows us to then live in this world in a way that we would otherwise never be able to.

Today, we're living with this threat called "coronavirus" and "COVID-19," but we know, this is not the first deadly threat to our lives, and it certainly won't be the last. But we also know that not even this disease, whatever happens with it, is outside of God's plan. Not even this disease is outside of God's ability to use it for his ultimate good. There may be pain, and suffering, and death because of it. We'll be praying a lot about it. And we won't ever fully understand what God's plan in the present truly is.

But we do know, without a doubt, that as Jesus says, not even this COVID-19 is an illness that leads to death. Not for those who are in Christ. But rather it, as are all things, is for the glory of God, for his Son to be glorified through it, and since he has made us his own, it is for our eternal glory, as well. Live, therefore, to the glory of God, and live knowing you have an eternal hope and faith, given personally to you by the one who is both your Resurrection and your Life. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**