

Our Glory & Our Shame

First UMC of Pocatello

Palm Sunday

April 10, 2022

John 12:9-19

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one of the more familiar stories to those of us who have long been a part of Christian worship. This is the event that kicks off Holy Week. With the waving of palm branches, we join in the intensity and exuberance of the crowd. We see the "red carpet" of cloaks and palms laid before the humble king, who comes riding upon a donkey. We hear the people's royal acclamations; their *Hosannas* adorn the air. And the jubilee of this moment is not without its shadow, for as Matthew's Gospel tells us, "The whole city was in turmoil, saying, *Who is this?*" (21:10), and in John's Gospel, we know that the chief priests and the Pharisees lay in wait for Jesus; in their secret councils they have already condemned him to death.

Familiar though it is *to me*, I've never preached from John's version of the story until now. I had never before noticed just how much Lazarus continues to feature in the story, how much he determines the events and the significance of this day.

John reports that while Jesus was still visiting with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, a great crowd found out that he was there and came to Bethany to see him. They came "not only because of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus" (12:9). Remember, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, called him forth from his tomb and restored him to his household and his life. Lazarus is now attracting a lot of attention. The news of his resurrection has had some time to travel, and people from all over want to see this walking, talking miracle, want to get in the vicinity of this person who's been touched by Jesus' love and power. It's "on account of him," we're told, "that many...were believing in Jesus" (12:11).

The man raised from the dead, by the very fact that he lives, is directing attention to the one who raised him, to Jesus. He is a sign,

pointing to Christ. People are coming to faith in Jesus because Lazarus is directing them to the one who changed his life. The chief priests, who've already passed judgment on Jesus, they can't stand it. Jesus' influence is reverberating through the world they're trying to control. So, they come together and decide that Lazarus must die as well.

The minute that they do, Jesus leaves Bethany to go to Jerusalem. He heads to the city of God to participate in the Passover with his people.

A crowd of those who saw him raise Lazarus from the dead goes with him, testifying along the way - *about Lazarus*. Another crowd *in the city* hear that Jesus is on his way, and they go out to meet him - *because they've heard about Lazarus*. Crowd meets crowd in one chaotic, charged moment that the disciples will not understand until much later, and the name of Lazarus is on everybody's tongue, his story is in everybody's mind: *Join us! Didn't you hear? The man who raised Lazarus is coming! I wonder what he can do for me and you.*

With John's Gospel before us, we can't talk about Palm Sunday or the beginning of Holy Week without talking about Lazarus one more time.

I think it's safe to assume that none of us has been raised back to life after being literally dead for four days. That seems like something it would've been important to tell the new pastor on his way in. But I *would* bet that many of us, since we're here, know what it's like to have an old life and new life. Whether a new and abundant life came to us radically in a moment of decision and surrender, or whether it's something that becomes clearer and more accessible to us each day as we grow, we possess stories of personal transformation; we too have been touched by the power and love of Jesus.

Maybe you've been freed from addiction or pride or the guilt of making a colossal mess of your life through his powerful and unmerited forgiveness.

Maybe you've come to truly see the presence of Christ in your neighbor, and have found yourself pulled into greater depths of solidarity with the poor and the poor in spirit.

Maybe you have awakened to your potential as God's image-bearer, and have suddenly found life worth living, the world worth loving.

Maybe you have heard the gentle whisper which calls to us from within all things and all moments, inviting us to be still and know that God is God, and have been released into a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Maybe you have come to trust him as your daily companion, never giving you more than you can carry, going through all things with you, and have attained a purity of heart, a hope that will not be shaken.

No matter what *your* story of transformation is, no matter how you might see your own story reflected in the story of Lazarus, you are a living sign, pointing to Jesus. John's Gospel shows us three things that happen when we have been called out of the old and into the new.

The first one is this: Jesus gets the glory. The people are testifying about Lazarus; they're going out to try and see him. But they are *believing* in Jesus, *singing* to Jesus, *identifying* Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. The glory that might be Lazarus' is totally surrendered, offered, and returned to his Savior. His glory is Jesus shining through him, and it gives so many others hope that Jesus can make possible for them, too, what seems impossible. Lazarus may draw a crowd, but it'll be a crowd around Jesus. Jesus is Lazarus' Alpha and Omega, the origin and the end of his fame, the one who gave him life and the one to whom his life will be given.

So, Jesus gets the glory. The second thing is that Jesus also takes the shame. Once judgment has been passed by the chief priests against Lazarus' life, once the threatening shadows begin to collect around his home, Jesus gets out of town. This is a simple but profoundly merciful act, for by departing Bethany Jesus exposes himself to those who want to harm him. He draws their attention back completely to himself. From the fifty-thousand-foot view, you can imagine him siphoning the poison away from his friends as he heads to Jerusalem.

So, not only does Jesus step between us and those who would praise us. He also steps between us and those who will inevitably criticize, condemn, and convict us for relishing and expressing our newness of life.

Having taken our glory and our shame upon himself, Jesus gives birth the third characteristic of our redeemed lives. Since *he* takes responsibility for both the meaning and the blowback, are we not then freed to love perfectly, to love fearlessly? We won't need recognition, so we won't get in our own way. We won't fear condemnation, so we won't be intimidated by the powers set against us. Why *not* pursue that crazy dream Jesus gave to the church, his dream to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, minister to the sick, visit the incarcerated, welcome the stranger, befriend the friendless, forgive debts, humbly inherit the earth?

As I say all this, I remember a time in my life when I wish I had trusted Jesus more to be my glory and my shame. For years, I had been participating in a weekly creative writing group with men on North Carolina's Death Row. It was an experience which absolutely transformed my life. And then one day, I received a call from the new warden at the prison, a man who held a much more punitive philosophy of incarceration than his predecessor. He had decided to cut all the creative programming that was happening on the unit - no more drama, no debate, no writing - simply because, in his eyes, the men did not deserve such things. He was calling to tell me that my volunteer status had been revoked.

I was crushed, and I made the mistake of taking the whole situation personally. I believed that my relationship with the men was over, that there was nothing I could do. I, and what I thought I had to offer, had been rejected.

I wish I had remembered that this was not personal at all. On the one hand, I had simply been expressing my vocation obediently, whatever glory there was in it while it lasted, Jesus knew, and he would use it. On the other hand, the powers and principalities of the world will always, always, always seek to mow down the death-defying blossoms of life, wherever they take root and grow. If I had remembered that every glory had already been crucified in Jesus and every crucifixion had already been robbed of its claim to glory, I think I would have either fought harder, come to acceptance sooner, or asked the men, the actual victims, how they would like to proceed given the newly constrained conditions of our relationship. Instead, I folded too soon and fixated too long on what I had lost.

When I received a call about a year later from Rodney, one of the men who lives on the Row, and he told all the people beyond the prison that he was still reaching through his writing, his religious teaching, and his chess lecturing, I realized how much I had miscalculated where the glory lie and overestimated the power of evil.

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus told his disciples:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)

They planned to put Lazarus to death as well.

And yet the Apostle Paul proclaims in the post-resurrection reality:

If God is for us, who can be against us? ...Who will bring any charge against God's elect? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31b, 33a, 35a, 38-39)

So, friends, as we come into this holiest of weeks, may we pray that God make us to be no more than a Lazarus, a sign of what Jesus can do in the human heart and in human life; and may we be nothing less than Lazarus, a name on the lips of the people, gathering them to Jesus, in whom their no longer fear of condemnation or preoccupation with success. Our glory and our shame belong to someone else. We are truly free.

Thanks be to God. Amen.