

April 2, 2017

St. John 11:17-27:

“From Jesus to Us ... A Certain Victory!”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson is a small portion of a much larger section that is full of comfort for those who believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and are faced with dying. In John 11, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. It is a matter of fact that is indisputable even to the enemies of our Lord. John writes, "The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 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.'" It was from this point that they made plans to put Jesus to death. What a commentary on what happens when all you can think about is yourself. When you are into yourself, you become totally desensitized to the facts when they are against what you desire. You become willing to do whatever it takes to satisfy yourself - even kill.

What we see in John 11, in the account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, is the Lord Jesus Christ working diligently to empty people of themselves in order to fill them with resurrection and life. He clearly states his work right from the beginning. When Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus about Lazarus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill," he responded, "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." What does Jesus mean by that? Doesn't Lazarus die? Yes, but he is also raised! Still, there is this movement through death before life. Furthermore, Jesus says that this will be for "glory" - to shed light, to reveal the heart of the Father when it comes to our salvation through his one and only Son. If there is to be glory, that which is inglorious in us must be brought to an end. For there to be revelation, ignorance and lie must die. In order to be filled with the one who is everything, our self-absorption must be brought to a screeching halt.

The way in which Jesus does this work in the account of Lazarus is stunning, and explains a lot about what we find ourselves going through in the Christian life. The whole thing is not a pleasant experience. There is much we could say about this. Lazarus goes through some sort of illness and dies. His sisters are stressed by illness and death. When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was, and appears to exasperate the situation. Later, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to Judea again. The disciples object because many of the people there want to kill him. Still, Jesus will set aside any consideration for himself to do the work he must do, and the disciples will go with him into the danger. And after Jesus announces that Lazarus is dead, Thomas sums it all up by saying to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Whether Thomas knew it or not, he said a mouthful. It is based on a simple truth. When someone that we care about dies, we and what was going to be next dies too. The comfort we might have been living turns to discomfort, our joy turns to grief, our plans change, and everything that we might have wanted is now removed to make way for something else. That is how Jesus works in our lives. He removes obstacles, all of them boiled down to the obstacle of ourselves. With this, he brings us to despair of ourselves, and leads us to the death of ourselves, in order to give us what we really need. All of this continues even in the actions and conversations with Martha and Mary. One notes upset in both of them. Martha races to meet Jesus and Mary stays put, but both will say in different moments the same thing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (11:21, 32)!"

We are told that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. The conversation between Martha and Jesus, that is recorded in our Gospel lesson for this morning, sets the stage for what will follow. While she is upset, as she considers that Jesus could have kept her brother from dying, she nevertheless declares: "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Should she or we be bothered that God would cause so much agony to create and sustain within her or us a faith to hold onto Jesus no matter what? Look at how she is emptied of herself and made ready to hear and receive what comes next. Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?" And our lesson tells us that she says "Yes," and exclaims that she believes that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God!"

When Jesus says "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die," he is setting forth a beautiful and mysterious reality. A believer dies, and yet he does not. In physical death, our soul lives with the Lord until that day he raises our body and we live with the Lord in both body and soul. The physical death of a Christian cannot take away the eternal life that Jesus gives. The raising of Lazarus proves this to be true. When a Christian dies, he does not even taste the forever death in which all deserve, because Jesus has tasted that death on the cross, as it says in Hebrews 2:9. And, his physical and spiritual sufferings have saved both our bodies and souls. Nothing will be lost but sin, death, and the devil. We will be restored and made complete.

Now that is wonderful truth! All that we feel that is being or has been lost must give way to life in the fullest sense - both physically and spiritually. Paul writes: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)." Indeed! The present sufferings . . . all of them . . . whether we see them as consequences of sin, the sin around us, the sin within, or even those moments when God is emptying us of ourselves through the harshness of his law - all will give way to glory. That is what we see in the raising of Lazarus. What Jesus does for him fulfills what he said he was going to do before he got to Bethany. He said that this was all going to give glory - glory revealed to us - that we might see - that we might know - that we might be made certain of all his promises.

It is simply staggering when you read the words of John 11:38-44. Hear it as it is, a true story given to you by a real person who heard it with his own ears, and heard it with his own eyes:

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

I often try to imagine what it must have been like for those who were there. Yet, I am also mindful of what they experienced is really no different than what the Lord does for us. Many of those people died that day. They had died with Lazarus and they died to themselves. But just as Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb of death, so did he call them to believe in the resurrection and the life. These things are even done for us in the hearing of the account by the almighty power of the Holy Spirit, who would kick out from under us the faulty notion of living and trusting in ourselves, only to lead us to live and trust in the one who raises the dead. "Lazarus, Come Out!" And he comes out from the stench of four days of death to life. And he stands as a declaration of pure victory over sin, death, and the devil. And, in the same way, he calls us to come out as well.

From Jesus To Us . . . A Certain Victory! When Jesus approached the tomb of Lazarus, the Greek says that his body literally shook (John 11:33). Not only did Jesus cry. He sobbed. He trembled as he saw the unnaturalness of death. He fully knows what we are going through, and what a wonderful thing it is to know that he calls us out of the whole thing, unbinds us, and commands us to be let go so that we may reach the destination that God has in mind for us. And so, this is what Jesus raises in this true account. He raises our hopes. He wells up within us a mighty anticipation of things to come. He lifts our eyes toward heaven. Death is not the end. For the Christian who believes, it is so certain that we can say without blinking an eye: "There is no such thing as death! In Jesus, there is only life!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott