

The Lens of Lent—Hindsight

John 11:17-27

March 29, 2020, 9:00 am (livestreamed)

Beargrass Christian Church

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Good morning—and again, thank you for joining us for worship.**
 - 1. I hope you have enough supplies and that you are staying well.**
 - 2. A crisis like the pandemic brings out the best and worst in us.**
- B. Did you see the video of three adult women fighting for the last package of toilet paper in a grocery store—incredible!?**
 - 1. It is also alarming that sales of guns and ammo have soared.**
 - 2. A man said, “I’m buying a gun to protect my family—people are crazy—who knows when they’ll come for our toilet paper?” (He was serious.)**
 - 3. What a strange combination—TP and ammo!**
 - 4. Then I realized—they both have the capacity to wipe us out!**
- C. And yet, I have also been inspired by all of the people who are trying to help—especially on the front lines, the first responders, medical staff who are risking their lives.**
 - 1. Many others are finding creative ways to stay connected.**
 - 2. And I am grateful for those who maintain a sense of humor.**
- D. One of my pun pals sent me an email last week.**
 - 1. The message, which I couldn’t help but embellish, said something like this...**
 - 2. “Hearing the jokes about toilet paper isn’t very Charmin.”**
 - 3. “TP or not TP—that is the question—it Scott to stop soon.”**
 - 4. “We should be Soft ‘N Gentle; this is Northern to laugh about.”**
 - 5. “Is this some kind of vast, 2-ply conspiracy?”**
 - 6. “It’s hard to absorb it all—I’m wiped out—I need a tissue!”**
 - 7. “I have to go now—I’m feeling flushed—like three sheets to the wind—but we’ve got to get to the bottom of this!”**
 - 8. “So, I’ll just try to roll along with it and leave it all behind.”**
- E. Speaking of behind, today we are thinking about hindsight.**
 - 1. We continue with our “Lens of Lent” sermon series.**
 - 2. We have read some powerful narratives in the Gospel of John—the story about Nicodemus, the well woman, and the blind man.**
 - 3. We have thought about oversight, insight, and re-visioning our understanding of Jesus’ identity and the abundant life he offers.**
 - 4. Let’s take a closer look at the story of Lazarus in John 11.**

II. THIS TEXT IS POWERFUL AND PIVOTAL.

- A. In John’s Gospel the account of the raising of Lazarus stands out.**
 - 1. Some describe the first half of the book as the “opening act.”**
 - 2. The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and last and perhaps the greatest of all of Jesus’ signs or miracles.**

3. So far, he has healed three people, turned water into wine, multiplied fishes and loaves, and walked on the water.
4. After six innings it is 6-0 with Jesus in control.
5. But in the bottom of the seventh the most formidable opponent of all is about to step to the plate—ol' Death himself.
6. The previous miracles were impressive, but Jesus will have to bring out his "best stuff" to rise to this challenge.
7. The story's location in John magnifies its significance.

B. This is the culmination of the signs that Jesus works in this Gospel.

1. This story powerfully sets the stage for the Passion story.
2. This story is about death and what Jesus has to say about the matter—in fact, it is loaded with death-related images.
3. Jesus and the disciples are hiding because of death threats.
4. A death brings them out of hiding.
5. Yes, the story is about death—but we find ourselves wondering: "Just whose death are we talking about anyway?"
6. When the disciples reach Bethany and the drama unfolds, the details seem to point beyond Lazarus to Jesus himself.

C. Lazarus' wake-up call seems to be the direct cause of Jesus' death.

1. After this seventh and greatest sign, the authorities meet, have a board meeting, and condemn Jesus to death.
2. A big part of this story seems very dark, heavy, and foreboding.
3. Terminal illness, danger, a grave, a death sentence, fear, long shadows, ominous music, gloom and doom.

III. BUT LET'S NOT MISS THE MESSAGE IN THE MIDDLE.

A. Jesus' behavior is so odd for the Son of God.

1. Do you remember how he acts when he first hears the impassioned pleas from Mary and Martha's messenger?
2. Does he rush back right away to be with Lazarus?
3. No, ol' Mr. Compassion hangs around two more days!
4. You'd expect him to catch the next burro to Bethany!
5. This nonchalant attitude is weird—these are his close friends!

B. In hindsight, Martha says to Jesus when he finally shows up: "If only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

1. The sisters have every right to be irate.
2. "Why didn't you come runnin' when you first heard the news?"

C. But into the midst of the gloom and doom of darkness and death...Jesus speaks words of life and light and hope!

1. The scope of the story is immense—and the real power of the story is contained in the enormous contrast.
2. Death strikes—Jesus brings life—and death strikes out!
3. Jesus' words to Martha come at exactly the right moment.

4. Right in the middle of this tragic drama, Jesus turns to her and says: "I am the resurrection. Do you believe this?"

D. Someone has claimed that our greatest fear is death.

1. "We may tame our economic problems, but even a really comprehensive health care plan won't solve death."
2. "We build hospitals for much the same reason as we build bombs—as a means to avoid or delay or escape death."
3. "We are jerked around by death—it won't go away."
4. "And when we forget the lessons of the past, it gets worse."

E. We have heard it said: "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

1. Winston Churchill also said: "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see."
2. But we seem to repeat the same mistakes again and again.

F. We observed the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

1. Yet incidents of anti-Semitism are rising around the world.
2. Six million died during the Holocaust—a million at Auschwitz.
3. But in a poll, only 66% of millennials knew about the camp.

G. History and hindsight are critical to help us see more clearly as we move into the future.

IV. WE HAVE TO HANG ON TO OUR STORIES.

A. In this pandemic we are echoing Martha's words... "If only...."

1. If only we had known how contagious this virus was....
2. If only we had taken the warnings more seriously....
3. If only we had started testing earlier....

B. As Australia and South America burn and plagues of locusts consume crops in Africa and glaciers melt, we say, "If only...."

1. If only we had taken climate change more seriously sooner...
2. If only we had paid attention to the signs years ago...

C. And yet, even in the midst of troubling and terrifying situations...

1. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death...
2. Jesus proclaims: "I am the resurrection and the life."

D. This has been my experience as a pastor when I have been with you when your beloved family members and friends have died.

1. I have stood by the grave with many of you.
2. I have watched you grieve for your loved ones.
3. I have seen your faces, too, as you consider the reality that one day others will be grieving because you have passed away.
4. And yet, as darkness begins to surround you, Jesus comes speaking words of light and life... "I am the resurrection."

E. Into difficult times, Jesus comes, speaking words of assurance.

1. We have been there before; we shall be there again.
2. We answer the phone and hear words that break our hearts.
3. We stand in hospital rooms, shifting our weight from one foot to the other, watching helplessly as the shadows creep closer.

4. And that doesn't even begin to include the hundreds of little "deaths" and losses that hound us and haunt us...
5. Loneliness, broken relationships, unemployment, illness, feelings of uselessness—fill in your own blanks.
6. These are common experiences for us—times when our lives are coming apart at the seams and our words make no sense.
7. There appears to be nothing in our power to hold it together.
8. We grasp for something to hold on to...we long for hope.
9. And there are times that we find it...in hindsight.

V. IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT HINDSIGHT IS "20/20."

- A. Why was Martha able to say, "If only you had been here...?"
 1. Because of hindsight—she had seen what Jesus could do.
 2. She had seen the miracles—she remembered the healings.
- B. Here we are, 2000 years later, tempted to say, "If only...."
 1. But because of hindsight, we know the stories of Jesus.
 2. We have heard of the miracles—we remember the resurrection.
- C. One of our church members sent me a note about a near-death experience—and she gave me permission to share it with you.
 1. She wrote: "Several weeks ago I talked with you about how troubled and bewildered I was when I failed to encounter angels or see a bright tunnel of light when I was so ill."
 2. "I was afraid that I really didn't understand salvation or had somehow completely veered off the heavenly path."
 3. "While I still can't claim to have all the answers, I believe I understand things a bit better now."
 4. "It finally dawned on me that it was simply not my time to depart and that the presence of God and God's love were all around me—through the doctors, nurses, therapists, family, friends, ministers, colleagues and complete strangers who continuously reached out to me and encouraged me."
 5. "All those people helped me find a path on this earth."
 6. "So, I am regaining strength and gathering a supply of 'candles' to be ready to spread some light and love to others in need."
 7. "I want everyone to know that I am finding my way back."
- D. Friends, we long to see the light at the end of the tunnel.
 1. Sometimes it is faint...out there...somewhere in the future...
 2. And at times it appears suddenly...right here...right now...
 3. At other times the light at the end of the tunnel is behind us...and we are called to find our way back...
 4. But wherever we are...and whatever we are facing...
 5. There are words that ring out through eternity...
 6. "I am the resurrection and the life...you can believe this."