

5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.22.26

John 11:1-6, 17, 30-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was....

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days... Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The religious authorities who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the authorities who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the authorities said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because 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 looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (463)

I am a chicken when it comes to horror movies. This has always been true, something I used to test about myself every few years when I was younger but now simply accept. I know to steer clear of horror movies.

A recent development in this immovable fact about me, my imagination, and the stickiness of horror movies to my mind is that not only does seeing one disrupt my sleep, now also hearing about one does.

I stumbled into horror movie exposure this week when an Oscar winner's performance was noteworthy enough to reach inside my bubble. For not only am I

insulated from horror movies, I'm insulated from the Oscars too. But when it comes to the Oscars, this isn't something I've needed to do, just something that seems to have happened. I've never seen an Oscars ceremony, nor indeed any awards ceremonies—which again isn't a stance I'm taking, it's just a weird fact. They don't interest me. I figure I'll hear about the interesting bits in the morning. Most of the things being considered aren't things I'll experience anyway because there's only so much time in life.

Whatever. This week, time presented itself for a podcast about the Oscars, which mentioned Amy Madigan's unlikely performance as Aunt Gladys and the movie that gave it rise, *Weapons*. I knew nothing about it, but had seen Madigan's performances in the past, was happy to hear she's still acting, and remembered hearing that *Weapons* was a really good movie.

Some more time presented itself (folding laundry, emptying the dishwasher) and I got on YouTube to see a breakdown of her performance—which I probably wouldn't end up seeing so why not just learn about what she did, spoilers and all?

Well,

Weapons is a horror movie (but the Oscar never goes to a horror movie!) and Madigan plays the villain, cartoonish, supernatural in a way that's never entirely settled but has internal coherence so it's all the more effective at being frightening, and indeed very frightening. (But the Oscars never go to cartoonish villains!) It was too late when I discovered that even this YouTube analysis would disrupt my sleep.

Too late: awake in the middle of the night and unable to get up and do anything productive (because what if Aunt Gladys was in my house, which, like Tetanus, once you've got her, it's too late?) I figured I'd try to wrestle a sermon out of it—sermons which often arrive around sleep. (My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.)

Morning: the Gospel of John presents God as pouring Godself out for the created order to be made complete, which is the reversal of so many horror movie tropes.

Last week, in a very explainy sermon, perhaps indeed too explainy, I spoke of the worldview of the Gospel of John, that the creation is yet incomplete, that at the time of Jesus' life in the world the creation was but three days into being made, a far journey yet to that 7th day of rest. This is why Jesus didn't honor the sabbath throughout the Gospel of

John (which he didn't do in other gospel narratives as well, but for different reasons) and why he often spoke of doing the work of the Father, having come to the world to do the work of the Father, to complete the work of the Father, and to appeal to others to join in that work that even we might do the works Jesus did and even greater works than these.

And in important ways, the creation is yet incomplete. As we most ordinarily experience it, the creation is yet incomplete, which explains the enduring presence of evil and explains the brute fact of human suffering and indeed the suffering of other creatures if not even all creatures at some point or another, the profligacy of death in the grinding on of creation, and even in the progress of creation. Evolution is itself a death-machine. But it isn't that God is okay with all this; it isn't that God is either not good or not sovereign. It's simply that God isn't finished. The work is ongoing, moving toward completion.

But it's also true that God is finished. The creation is complete, which can only truly be said from the time perspective of our lives in the future perfect tense. God will have completed the creation. Christ, it will be revealed at last, will have perfected the creation. When all is said and done and time has come to an end, it will be revealed in redeeming glory that Christ completed it and we who followed Christ amidst history were living in the beginning of the end, a perfected end whose glory and grandeur were to be felt and known but incrementally amidst history in the meantime of which we can rest assured that Christ will have perfected the creation.

And according to John, the moment in which it was made complete, the moment when its perfection was poured out, was the moment when Christ was raised on the cross. Giving of himself, God indeed poured out so to become the all in all: this was the revelation of the what and the how. God would give absolutely of Godself and the creation would be full of God's graces—sustaining life, enduring peace, utter fulfillment. “It is finished,” Jesus even said at that moment according to John, this moment of out-pouring, grace upon grace. God emptying Godself so to fill the world is the moment of the cross.

And the arrival of this moment, it being pressed upon the world as it but went about its business, came when Lazarus had died and Jesus was made to visit his tomb, indeed to swap places with him in the tomb. For that's what raising Lazarus amounted to for Jesus. This, raising Lazarus from the dead, or really raising anyone from the dead, is the final and most astonishing sign of what shall be worked out of the world once God is worked into it

as the all-in-all: this is the thing that would get the attention of the authorities. This is the thing that would get them to act. "So, from that day on," the story notes, "they planned to put him to death."

We're but halfway through the gospel narrative at this point but very near to the end of the story, very near to the cross. John's Gospel can be split very nearly in two. The first half of it are events of Jesus' life, signs he performed that signified God's presence and intent and that indicated how utterly God abided in Jesus and Jesus abided in God, signs that often came of intimate encounters Jesus shared with one other person, Nicodemus here, the woman at the well there. This isn't a gospel where much happens before crowds. We get crowds according to Matthew. We get lots of crowds, big and growing crowds, according to Mark. John gives us one-to-one encounters, even exchanges, I-and-Thou meetings to enact among them the presence of God.

The second half of the gospel is Jesus gathered for a last supper with his disciples. Here he'd talk to them about God, in what's come to be called the Farewell Address, and then he'd talk to God about the disciples, in what's come to be called the High Priestly Prayer. Sometime during all of this, Judas Iscariot leaves the table, the room, heads out into the night. Then comes Jesus' arrest. Then his trial. Then the crucifixion. Then his death: "It is finished."

The hinge event between these two modes is this one, when Lazarus has fallen ill, has eventually died, and when word reached Jesus where he was and where he would stay two days longer, where indeed he would *abide* two days longer.

It might seem a callous move. That this emergency is underway and Jesus tarries, that this crisis that could have been avoided is allowed instead to happen while Jesus takes a couple days on his--what?--long weekend away?

What he is actually doing with this apparent delay is abiding with God two days longer, the word used here one of John's favorites, *menos*, Greek meaning abide or stay and dwell. We hear it first when John the baptizer testifies that he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus and *menos* on him. We see it next when John gets the attention of two would-be disciples that here, in Jesus walking by, was the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, whom, when they've turned to follow Jesus, Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" and they reply, "Where are you staying?" which is to say "Where do you abide and what

abides in you?" Thirty-four times John would rely on this word in his gospel of twenty-one chapters, the sixteenth of which is this one, indicating that two days longer Jesus dwelt where he was—dwelling there, staying there, abiding there as if to fill up for an event that would require a lot of him, would require indeed some preparation, a filling up before an utterly emptying of himself out.

That this is what was to happen here comes all the clearer when, having arrived in Bethany, Jesus approached the village and Mary came to meet him on the way. There, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died," which might well be true but would also have been a means for Jesus to escape what was rightly to be pressed upon him, what history and purpose were pressing upon him, that he was to die that we might live, whose living would not ultimately be at the cost of something else dying but whose living would be everlasting and for all.

For the fact of the matter is that, as things are now, we only live because something else has died. Our sustenance depends upon something else perishing that we might consume it. The brutal equation that the creation-as-it-is insists upon is that some things must die in order that other things might live.

And this itself is the problem—this is itself the problem for which God sends his Son as a solution, that this problem might be worked out, that this impurity might be refined out of the creation. For what God has in mind for all creation is Being like the burning bush revealing God's Being, burning though never consumed, never reduced to ash, never exhausting its fuel, but somehow, somehow sustained, sustained Being. Shalom.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the authorities who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved—and perhaps because his friend had died, and perhaps because this, his other friend, was in such grief, was herself weeping, and perhaps because here it fully came home to him what problem he'd been sent to work out, what work he'd been to sent to work on, this dreadful truth that we all know but must keep out of our consciousness as we go about our lives because otherwise going about our lives would be too difficult—which though some people do indeed suffer some especially young people these days do suffer, feeling themselves to be unworthy of what resources they consume and what waste they produce, as if being itself, or being *themselves*, is

irredeemably profligate. Unable to justify their own existence, to say nothing of rejoicing in it.

It's also possible that Jesus, disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, was feeling for himself. That here, at Lazarus' tomb, he would sacrifice in such a way that would save, he would sacrifice himself in service of a new world bearing forth, a new understanding of what salvation looks like and a new spirit that it might come to be so: it's possible this accounts for those gut-level feelings.

The gospel suggests this all the more strongly when its challenging truth comes full circle back to Jesus. "Where have you laid him?" he asked Mary and the religious authorities who were there with her, and they said to him, "Lord, come and see."

-which is the very phrase with which this whole thing began, Jesus saying it when the first disciples took notice of him: "Come and see," then the first disciple saying it to the second one called: "Come and see." A while later, the woman at the well would say this to her whole town of Jesus, "Come and see someone who told me everything I've ever done." And now it has come back to him, as if this whole mission had now taken on a life of its own. The world was awakening to the possibility that there's something to come close to, something to see, something beyond what's obvious, beyond what's good enough. And now it wasn't only Jesus to say this, or to spur the saying of it. The word had gone ahead and taken up the work unto itself-and for Jesus, it was now time.

And so he wept.

The religious authorities tried to make sense of it: "See how he loved him!" But this doesn't square because he knew this death wasn't going to be victorious, that rather something of God's glory would come through it all and Lazarus would again live.

Jesus, however, would die. That glory to come through would mean for him the cross, the pouring out of himself that the world might live. After all, he was the bread of life, given that the world might sustain. Likewise, as Karoline Lewis pointed out in her commentary of John, the imaging often to come of this Gospel was of the nursing breast, the bosom poured out, filled up, and poured out again, an astonishingly sustaining flow.

It's been a criticism throughout church history, some supposing the eucharistic meal was monstrous. In its claim that what's eaten is the body of Christ and what's in the cup is the blood of Christ: it all seems cannibalistic, vampyric; it all seems monstrous. But

it's actually a turning inside out of that monstrosity—a turning inside out clear when set in contrast to one common trope of horror stories and more recently horror movies.

That an old creature has come to feed on the young, that an undying creature seeks the lifeblood of those still vital and burgeoning: that this shows up in so many creature-features (not saying anyone in particular: no spoilers here): that this still has the power to horrify (me at least) means that it points to something we fear might be true about ourselves, if in some less pronounced way.

This world: this world: we consume and despoil. We must kill in order to live, the basic fact of which can be justified (for what else can we do?), but also can be a slippery slope. Where's the line between need and want? Where's the line between diet and debauchery, desire distorted so death becomes its own sick glory? Where's the line between necessary and gratuitous, between honorable and horrible? One thing seems clear lately, the most powerful players on the world stage seem to have crossed that line, and seem practically to be dancing on the far side of it.

So what if coming there is a realm in which that line bears no need and no meaning? What if the death that we're approaching as we come closer to Holy Week is the final death in some profound way, one that raises that horizon past which now we cannot fully see, past which now we cannot at all move, can only anticipate, can only hope for, aim for?

Jesus will trade places with Lazarus, and in so doing he'll awaken us to a dawn whose day never ends. We will live. All will live, will have life and have it in abundance. As a bush that burns but is never consumed. As a God emptied that all might be full. Come and see.

Come and see.

Thanks be to God.