

### Come and See

Three weeks ago we met Nicodemus, softly rapping at Jesus' door under cover of night, the teacher who despite the risk to his reputation, just had to be a learner, too. The following week we met the Samaritan woman at the well, who encountered Jesus at high noon and ran back into town to invite her neighbors to become his disciples. "**Come and see!**" she cried, like a sideshow barker urging her audience to step inside the tent. And last week we met the man born blind who received the unexpected gift of sight. We left him, still rubbing his eyes, at the feet of Jesus, "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Today, on this fifth Sunday in Lent, we meet Lazarus. Actually, that's not quite accurate, is it? Lazarus is the catalyst for this story, but not the main character. His illness and death set the stage for the action, but we don't actually learn very much about him, do we? Frederick Buechner says that Lazarus is the only person in the gospels who seems to have no standing at all except as a friend of Jesus. He's not a disciple. He's not a religious authority. He's just Jesus' friend, somebody Jesus loves.

Lazarus gets sick and his sisters Mary and Martha are worried, so they send a message to Jesus, "**Lord, he whom you love is ill.**" We expect to read that Jesus drops everything and rushes to Lazarus' side. But he doesn't. He waits two days before he begins the two-day trip to Bethany. By the time he gets there, Lazarus is dead, buried, and on his way to becoming the dust to which we shall all return.

John provides a theological defense for Jesus' delay. It was to provide another dramatic demonstration of Jesus' power. No doubt John has good reasons for believing that, but I wonder if another explanation is just as plausible.

I know someone whose twin sister died just after their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. The morning she died, he got a call from the hospital. The time was close. Could he come? He jumped out of bed, and he could have dressed and rushed out of the house, but he didn't.

He took the time to shower and shave. It was an absurd thing to do in the circumstances, and he has always regretted doing it, because by the time he got to the hospital, cleanly shaved and neatly dressed, his sister was dead. They began life together, and he had the chance to be with her when her life ended, but he wasn't.

That was more forty years ago, and the only explanation he can come up with is that in some inexplicable way, he thought that if he delayed leaving just those ten minutes, she would live ten minutes longer.

I am the person in that story. Of course, my behavior that morning was nonsensical. Absurd. But countless times since my ordination, I have heard other people say very much the same thing.

- “If only I hadn’t had that second cup of coffee, we wouldn’t have left for school late, and we wouldn’t have been in the intersection when that driver ran the red light.”
- “If only I hadn’t left the room for five minutes, he wouldn’t have died alone.”
- “If only I’d hadn’t dozed off, I’d have been holding her hand.”

Maybe Jesus, despite his love for Lazarus, couldn’t bear the prospect of looking into one more pair of desperate eyes, or maybe he thought that if he waited a couple of days, his friend would be alright. Whatever the case, by the time he does get there, Lazarus is dead, and Martha and Mary are in no mood to mince words.

**“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”** Martha says it first, and then Mary. *A fine friend you turned out to be. A fine Messiah, too. Our brother was dying, and you didn’t come. What’s the point of giving nighttime Bible lessons, healing blind men, and chatting with Samaritan women, if you don’t come to help your own friend?*

Grief has a way of getting to the heart of the matter.

The stories in John’s Gospel operate on several levels at the same time. There is no one way to understand what happens next, but here is what I hear. Jesus asks, **“Where have you laid him?”** Mary and Martha reply, **“Come and see.”** Then Jesus begins to weep.

What brings on those tears? I think the key is these words **“Come and see.”** In John, these words are the formula for inviting people to become disciples of Jesus.

- **“Teacher, were are you staying?”** two inquirers ask. **“Come and see,”** says Jesus (1:39).

- **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** Nathaniel asks Philip. **“Come and see,”** Philip replies (1:46).
- **“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done,”** says the woman at the well (4:29).

**“Where have you laid him?”** Jesus asks. **“Come and see.”**

I think that in this moment Jesus himself is being called to become a disciple. He’s being called upon to look at his own death, his own grave clothes, to see the heavy stone rolled over the door of his own tomb, to smell the stench of his own rotting flesh. I think that he hears from the lips of Martha and Mary an invitation to die for his friend Lazarus, to take his place. And more than that, he hears the call within his own divine and human heart to die for the whole world.

**“And Jesus began to weep.”** He weeps for himself and what he is about to encounter in Jerusalem. He weeps for the friends who are about to desert him, and for the crowds who will call for his death on the cross. He weeps for the pain of the nails which will be driven into his flesh and for the greater pain of feeling forsaken by everyone, including God.

Jesus begins to weep, and he weeps even now for brothers who magically think that a ten-minute delay will keep their sisters from dying, and for sisters who die without them. He weeps for the children of Mosul caught in the crossfire of a merciless war, and for children left alone because of their parents’ opioid addiction.

He weeps for you and me because we feel so lost, because we *are* lost without him. He weeps for love of us, his friends, and for himself and what he must do to show us how much he loves us.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is called the “Lamb of God” (1:36), and he dies on the cross at the moment the Passover Lamb is slaughtered in the temple. He is, in other words, a sacrifice for us. ***The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.***

Some Christians have taken this to mean that Jesus is somehow the victim of God’s own lust for punishment. He’s a sacrifice in the sense that he’s the victim of God’s divine justice.

Perhaps at one time that way of looking at Jesus' death was helpful. Now, I think, it distorts the gospel. Jesus is a sacrifice in the sense that he heads toward, not away from, the burning towers of our sin and need. He enters our lives; he climbs the stairs. He knows what he is doing. He puts his life on the line.

We learned from 9/11 what sacrifice looks like. Sacrifice wears a firefighter's helmet, a police officer's cap, a crown of thorns. ***Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.***

The Lamb of God stands by the grave of Lazarus and cries with a loud voice, **"Lazarus, come out!"** And when he does come out, the Lamb cries even louder, **"Unbind him, and let him go."**

This has been Jesus' mission all along – to unbind us and let set us free. Lazarus has a temporary reprieve from death, but it will not last. To secure our resurrection to eternal life, Jesus will have to take his place – our place. He will have to don the crown of thorns, the purple cloak, the grave clothes Lazarus has discarded. He will have to drink the cup which he could have declined if he hadn't loved us more than his own life.

We are but two weeks away from Easter. Next Sunday we will march into church with palm fronds, singing "Hosanna to the Son of David." Then we will hear the events that Jesus sees right now, standing at the grave of his friend Lazarus. The cries will change from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify!" The friends who pledged loyalty to the death will scatter like so many frightened sheep.

And we will hear, too, the story of how, knowing all this would take place, Jesus still washed his disciples' feet, called them his friends, and gave them bread and wine to be shared in remembrance of him.

Come and see the Lamb of God. Come and see the Savior of the World. Come and see the Christ who wept, and died, and lives to save the world – who lives to set you free.

*Prayer: O God, you have so greatly loved us, long sought us, and mercifully redeemed us. Give us grace that in everything we may yield ourselves, our wills and our works, a continual thank-offering to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*