

PSALM 130

- ¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
² Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!
- ³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.
- ⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
- ⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

JOHN 11:1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he

was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews 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. ³²When 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." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had

done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' ⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not understand that it is expedient for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' [...] ⁵³So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

⁵⁴ Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

SERMON

I know you all are much more culturally advanced than I am, so I'm sure none of you have ever picked up a People magazine while waiting for the dentist or doctor or whomever. But, if you ever do, you'll see these sort of hilarious pages toward the front called "Stars, They're Just Like Us!" The pages are filled with a spread of photos of famous people doing normal things. Like, look, Ben Affleck is buying a cup of coffee at Starbucks! Taylor Swift is walking out of a gym where she was probably exercising! Tom Hanks is having lunch at a restaurant with his son! Beyoncé is taking out the trash in her apartment. Actually, I'm kidding about that last one. Beyoncé doesn't take out the trash. The photos are all a little silly, because they point out this totally obvious idea that famous people are, in fact, people too. They eat and fly on airplanes and walk their dogs and take their kids to school just like the rest of us do. But, I guess the rest of us don't have a hoard of paparazzi following us while we go about our daily lives, so I think we all might be getting the better end of that deal.

Anyway, I think we have a habit of doing basically this same thing to Jesus whenever we think about him. Not so much because he's famous or whatever, but more so because we tend to look at Jesus

and think “God” rather than “human being, just like us.” We imagine him turning water in wine, feeding 5000 people, walking on water, or in today’s story, raising the dead, and we sort of imagine him to be some kind of first century magician...or like a guy floating around on a glowing cloud in spotless white robes zapping the adoring crowd with his magical, healing fingers. We have this ingrained habit of making Jesus out to be something totally other than human. And when we do that we’re really causing two problems. First of all, it’s heretical. Like, actually heresy. There were these people back in the second century and they called themselves “Docetists.” Which literally means “Illusionists” in the Greek. Docetism is the belief that Jesus is fully God, and only appeared to be human, as a sort of illusion or trick of the eye. It was unequivocally declared heresy in the year 325 CE. The early church declared, and we still believe this today, that Jesus was somehow both fully God...but also fully human. He wasn’t fake human, all God. Now, honestly, heresy isn’t my issue with this view of Jesus. A little heresy now and then is not only normal, but probably also good for us. It’s really the second problem of this magical Jesus picture that I am concerned about. When we view Jesus as being “god” only, and not at all like any of us, we make him fundamentally unrelatable to ourselves. He becomes that celebrity in the photo, the one we just can’t quite believe actually goes to the grocery store to buy food. Jesus, he’s not like us! And the problem with an unrelatable Jesus is that it cheapens both of our experience of being human, like the piddly problems of our human world don’t concern the God of the universe or something, and it lets us off the hook from the idea of being called to be like Jesus, because how could we be like him...if he’s the great God of the universe and all.

During the Medieval ages one of the debates among theologians was whether or not Jesus laughed. I'm not kidding. There are thousands of pages of theological thought about this absurd question: did Jesus laugh? Some people said, yes, of course he did! He's like us. Other people said, no, of course not! Jesus wouldn't do something so base as laugh! Still others found it offensive that the question would even be asked. The idea that the Great God of the Universe would laugh...it's fundamentally insulting! And while we may not ask this exact question today, I think the impulse is so understandable. Jesus is so other...so powerful...so different. He couldn't possibly be like us. And we couldn't possibly be like him.

But I think this story of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha shows us something very different about Jesus. Now, yes, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. That's a big deal. A huge deal. A very Godly thing to do. It's not exactly something any of us are doing in our own lives. At least so far as I know. And while it's not unique to Jesus, Peter, Paul, Elijah, and Elisha all have stories in scripture of raising people from the dead, it is a fairly significant and miraculous event. It sort of has the impact of setting Jesus apart from us.

But put that miracle aside for just a moment and look at the rest of the story.

This is really a story about friendships and family and relationships. At the core, this is an utterly human story. Lazarus is introduced to us as "the one whom [Jesus] loves" and this is the first trait we hear about his sisters, Mary and Martha, that Jesus loves them. When Jesus finally goes to see his friends, Lazarus is already dead. Martha and Jesus talk while walking, speaking together about the

resurrection, and Martha is angry, because if only, if only!, Jesus had been there. The conversation, by Biblical standards, sounds a bit rambly. It sounds like Martha is really grieving, and Jesus is there with her, as a friend and brother in her loss. Then Jesus and Mary go to Lazarus' tomb, and right here, at the tomb, we get the shortest little verse in the Bible, and probably one of the best examples of Jesus' humanity. Jesus Wept. In front of the tomb of his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept.

It's not exactly the action of a man who knows he's going to snap his fingers and Poof! Lazarus is alive again. Jesus weeps over the loss of his friend, perhaps over the grief of his other friends, Mary and Martha, and maybe even about the fact that he arrived days too late to have a chance to say goodbye.

To me, this is possibly a more powerful example of who Jesus was, as both a man and as the Son of God, than the actual raising of Lazarus from the dead. He is, at his very center, utterly human. Experiencing life in relationship with friends, walking on dusty roads, crying over the loss of a loved one. Because, for me, life isn't about individual miracles or unexpected, occasional moments of greatness. So much more of ourselves is lived in the everyday, small interactions between mom and son, husband and wife, brother and sister, colleague and friend.

I think the reason People magazine publishes photos of stars doing everyday things is that we like to see people who are relatable. We want to know that celebrities struggle with some of the same stuff we do. They also get frustrated by the long TSA lines at the airport and all that.

And this story of Jesus, I think it's as much, if not more, about Jesus, he's just like us! Than Jesus, he can raise people from the dead, when's the last time you did that!?

This distinction, in the Gospel of John, it's important. Because this story leads Jesus directly into the events of Holy Week. There's one more little story along the way, and we'll talk about that next week, but this interaction with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus...this is what leads to that shadowy conversation among Caiaphas and the other leaders. They're so worried that if people keep following Jesus, Rome will take notice and destroy the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. So, Caiaphas suggests that it would be expedient to have Jesus killed, in order to save the whole Jewish nation.

Now, yes, the fact that he raised Lazarus from the dead really matters here. It's a huge sign. People might initially follow Jesus because of the miracles, but I think they stick around because of his humanity. His following is gaining momentum because of who he is, not just the flashy things he does. And, at his heart, he's so human. He's a friend and a brother and he cares about the least. He weeps over the loss of Lazarus. When he prays, there's heart behind it, not just empty words. He makes the leaders uncomfortable because he's the genuine article: miracles, and love, and honesty, and a consistent, verifiable message of hope.

Jesus, he is like all of us.

So, in these next few weeks, as we prepare our hearts and minds to delve into the time of Holy Week and the shadows that it brings, let's

meditate in this season on what makes Jesus so compellingly, beautifully human. Our brother, not just our Great God of the universe. And let's aim to emulate Jesus, learning to be his disciples by doing the work of his hands and feet here, now, in the relationships we are already in.