

OPENING:

There was an Episcopal priest who used to get flack because, whenever someone would die, he would suggest that the family read the Burial Offices in our prayer book as a means of preparation for the grief work to come.

The family would resist saying:

“Why would you want me to read such a downer at a time like this?”

TO which the priest would reply: “Read it, you might be surprised.”

Our Gospel this morning features the opening lines to the funeral service in our *Book of Common Prayer*:

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”¹

That’s how our Episcopal funeral service begins. In those words, you hear the Church’s deep knowledge about death and life and about resurrection and hope.

The deep knowledge is that we try, at those moments, to call out the lie that is death,

knowing that our faith rests on our proclaiming God’s victory over death in the resurrection.

I believe that that will happen on the last day,
and I have seen it happen in my own life.

CAVEAT:

But, whenever I do a funeral, as I am standing at the back ready to begin with those words, I always feel a little sheepish when I deliver them, my voice has to echo Jesus’ words from our story and it has to echo the ability of Christ’s voice to call out the dead. It seems a little bit of a stretch.

Likewise, I confess there is almost too much on the plate this morning because:

- 1) We also have another long, complex story from John
- 2) We also have the end of Lent and the start of the busiest time of the Church Year: Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

¹ BCP, pgs. 469, 491.

I was thinking about all those things and this sermon, on Wednesday this past week, as Michelle and I sat in a nondescript lawyer's office, with an appointment to sign our wills, our medical power of attorney, and all that.

Let me reassure you: we have no health concerns, nothing pressing, that appointment with the lawyer came about because of all the legal and logistical "God forbid" that you would expect, and also because of the sense from the start of my sermon, that we are not supposed to be scared of death.

That appointment actually came about, gold star if you can remember, because at the start of this year I gave a sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, and I remarked how in our Prayer Book, the sections for getting baptized and making a will overlap... in this weird way... where the prayer book instructs parents to think about making out their wills.²

And I know if I am suggesting that it is wise for the congregation, I need to do it myself as well.

While I sat in the nondescript lawyer's office, with this lesson of Jesus and Lazarus, on my mind, the lawyer asked us these questions to determine if we were competent to sign the documents:

"What is your name?"

"What is your birthdate?" etc...

It was all so anticlimactic as we "signed our lives away."

It occurred to me that the scene was a kind of a parody of the Gospel lesson.

I compared those questions with Jesus' questions to Mary and to Martha:

"Do you believe?"

and "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

or even "Can these dry bones live?"

A pale comparison!

We indeed signed the papers and left the lawyer's office,

I am not sure what I was expecting or wanting to happen.

Maybe I wanted a sense of closure or some congratulations or something.

Instead we wrote a big check to the firm, went out the door very intent on not dying.

² BCP pg. 445

LAZARUS:

Do you think Lazarus had a non-resuscitation order?

What was in Lazarus' will? How much did he leave to Mary, and to Martha?

Was he scared to die? Do you think he said: "When I go, let me go"?

What does it mean that if he did do up his will, and that it did not do him a lot of good.

Maybe that's what you get when you get close to Jesus. When you are his best friend, as some speculate about Jesus and Lazarus, you get yanked out of the grave. Your DNR ignored and violated.

Jesus has that relationship with not only his friends. One scholar writes that:

"Jesus never met a corpse that doesn't sit up right on the spot.... he has that effect on the dead. They rise because he is the Resurrection even before he himself rises—because, in other words, he is the grand sacrament, the real presence, of the mystery of a kingdom in which everyone rises."³

That's what makes us stand up at the Funeral Liturgy. We are dead, or at least a part of us, before that happens, and then we come alive, just assuredly as Lazarus did from the tomb, and how we all will on the last day. There is something about hearing Jesus' voice, it makes us come out of the tombs of our lives and listen.

BAPTISM

I keep thinking about the connection between Baptism and one's Will and one's death.

The connection has been long made between the fact that we wear the same thing, if you were baptized as an infant, we wear long white gowns, which is also the traditional funeral garment color.

In both cases, it's important to note that we don't really get a choice in the matter.

In Baptism, at least as infants, we don't really choose, we are thrust into this way of life wearing these billowing white robes, babbling and incoherent, preverbal.

Just as Lazarus appears, he doesn't get a say, wearing these white funeral shrouds, bound and blinded by them, he appears coming from the grave in a similar state as a child at baptism... confused, postverbal.

³ Robert Farrar Capon. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 404-405

WILL

Contrast that state of mind with the intense personal decision related to following Jesus if you come from an evangelical background.

“Have you made your personal decision to follow Jesus, have you decided, etc.?” Problem with that, it’s not good enough. It’s not enough, your decision is not determinative. You are not holding on to Jesus, Jesus is holding on to you.

Maybe it is right there for the name of the thing: a “Will”.... It’s a declaration of intention, a human decision, a directive, an autonomous act. That’s how we view the world, and it’s important for us to try to control and contain it.

But those are so far from our baptismal and death experiences. Which are contingent, dependent, and outside our control.

Something about LMC sermon. Not really a choice, God came to me.

Surrender to a discipline

CONCLUSION

Note of defiance at the grave: Even at the grave we make our song

I thought again about the sermon that I gave back in January, the gist again was that we are baptized not in case we are going to die, but in case we are going to live.

AMEN