



Awaking the Dead

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

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In our gospel today, we read the story of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, who dies and is brought back to life by Jesus. We witness a vulnerable moment of loss and grief, hard considerations made in response to Jesus' decision to delay his intervention. We see puzzlement, sadness, anger, blame, compassion, and hope. We also see Jesus' conversation with the disciples, with Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, and with the rest of the local community. We finally see trust and acceptance but not in all: some still scoff at Jesus for his delayed action.

Both Martha and Mary challenge Jesus by saying "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The sisters' statement implies that they were sure Jesus would intervene in time: He could have done something to save their ill brother and his friend. He probably should have: they were expecting that much from him based on their intimate relationship. How could he not?

This passage follows and is tied to the one we heard last week about the man born blind (John 9). In fact, we heard that the blind man's disability was not a result of anyone's sin (his or his parents), but the occasion for seeing the glory of God. This week, Jesus explains that Lazarus' illness "is for the glory of God that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

The moral to both stories is not that God causes or allows bad things to happen to good people for God's own sake. Nor is it that bad things happen as a punishment or a teaching moment. This kind of reasoning falls in the same faulty theology that maintains it was God's plan and will all along that Jesus suffer and die because there was no other way to atone for human sin.

This "cause-and-effect" thinking limits God's power and will to the rigidity of a prescribed retribution law.

In the case of sickness and death and the human-caused evil of betraying or thwarting the human vocation to love, Jesus' response is life-giving. Jesus reveals that the essence of God's Being is life-giving love. Jesus constantly reveals God's character, God's glory, and extends to us the invitation to enter into the dynamic of that love. This is how we are being redeemed, freed, and saved.

Buddhism clearly and simply teaches that the fact that we get sick; the fact that we age; the fact that we die is part of nature and we are part of nature.¹ We cannot escape it. We cannot control it.

¹ O'Brien, Barbara. "The Five Remembrances." Learn Religions, Aug. 25, 2020, [learnreligions.com/the-five-remembrances-449551](https://www.learnreligions.com/the-five-remembrances-449551).

We may pray with all our might (and we should) that we, our loved ones, the world be spared the suffering of sickness and/or death.² And maybe God may grant us to live through hardships and the confinement of sickness; maybe God may grant us to overcome an illness and defy death... for some time. But again, illness, aging, and death are part of nature and sooner or later we will encounter it, just like Lazarus did and with him all the other people that Jesus brought back to life.³

So, the question is not “How *long* do you want to live?” but “*How* do you want to live?”

Or better yet, we can let Jesus ask us the question he asked to the man-born-blind: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35) or to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26)

I hope it does not come as a shock to you that we are all going to die. But the one death we need to worry about is spiritual death and we have already overcome that. If we have died already in (our baptism in) Jesus, then our second death is nothing to worry about.⁴

In fact, the apostle Paul thus reminds us in his letter to the Romans:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5)

During Lent, we remind ourselves of our calling through the gift of baptism. In those waters we die to ourselves, and we rise to Christ. We are new creatures, living according to a new set of values in the promise of the final resurrection of the body.

Whatever temporary time we are given to live is a gift. How best can we appreciate that gift, how can we best enjoy it and be grateful for it?

May we not get bitter in response to our ailments and hardship but find the wisdom and the light to see God at work in us and through us and give God the glory. Amen.

² Lk 22:42

³ Jesus also raised from the dead the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), and Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:40-56).

⁴ Colossians 3:2-4