

Kim O'Brien sermon 3-26-23, Jn 11:1-44

As a hospital chaplain, when family members tell me that they're "praying for a miracle", this is usually the miracle they're referring to

This miracle occurs at the pinnacle of Jesus' ministry

demonstrating his close connection to, and unity with God

Jesus has been going around performing various miracles

From the wedding at Cana, turning water into wine

To healing many who were sick

To feeding five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and fish

To walking on water and calming the sea

To the miracle we heard just last week of restoring a man's sight

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Today we hear about Jesus performing the ultimate miracle

When Jesus brings Lazarus out of his grave,

Wrapped in cloth

After being dead for four days...

It is truly an incredible story

So incredible, it really messes with the logic and reason side of our brain

We don't know where to put this story, as we wonder

"Did this really happen?!" / / /

"Did this really happen?" is a fair question

Doubt is not the opposite of faith

Indifference is

**Doubt** is an indication of a true, and curious relationship

And we learn, week after week, about how **relationship** is the thing that God most desires from us

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So, fresh from seminary studies, learning both Hebrew and Greek, delving into the historical, cultural and theological meanings of scripture, I'll tell you...

Did this really happen?

I don't know.

But... what I DO know, is that to focus on the logic and reason of this

And really ANY scripture story

Misses the depth, breadth, and beauty that scripture stories offer us

Instead of "Did this really happen?"

I prefer to focus on questions like

"What does this say about Jesus?"

"What do we learn about Jesus' relationship with God...

and with others through this story?"

"What do we learn about the nature of God here?"

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We read excerpts of the gospel each week, and it's crucial to consider today's passage in the midst of the arc of what's happening in John's gospel

Last week Jesus restored the blind man's sight

On the holy day of the Sabbath

Which really got the attention of the religious leaders, the Pharisees, in the community

They really began to wonder how Jesus might be threatening their community as he challenged the rules of the Sabbath

Then Jesus goes and raises Lazarus

Which is THE public act that tips the religious leaders toward putting him to death

Today is the day

That religious leaders decide Jesus has gone too far,

He becomes a threat        /        /        /

To understand this threat, let's consider a bit about how first century Jews thought about God and holiness

Jews maintained a strict purity system that protected God's holiness

And this system was enforced by the religious leaders like the priests and Pharisees

Impurities like blood, some illnesses, and death

Were controlled, and there were regulations around handling these impurities appropriately

There were very clear boundaries in this Jewish culture

Between where God could be (places and times deemed holy)

And where God could not be (places and times deemed impure)

These boundaries served two purposes

One to ensure God's continued presence in the Jewish temple

The other was to ensure the people's access to God, or

To continue to be in relationship with God and one another

Basically, they didn't want to get kicked out or force God to leave because of impurities

The book of Leviticus is filled with details about this

So throughout Jesus' ministry, and especially today, Jesus has been threatening what the Jews believed about these boundaries and God

He's been threatening what it means to be in relationship with God

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Today, as Jesus faces the greatest impurity within the force of death

He challenges Jewish religious understanding on a new level

Focusing just on the raising of Lazarus is to miss an essential part of the story,

which is Jesus' identity and how God is revealed through him

Jesus proclaims: "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." (Jn 11:25)

This "I am" is a primary focus, and thread, of Jesus, throughout the gospel of John

Jesus' declaration of "I am" is a statement of his connectedness to God  
 sharing fully in the power of God

And God revealing Godself through Jesus

As Christians, this might not sound as revolutionary as it did to Jewish  
 believers in the first century

Because we believe in the Trinity

But for ancient Jews, God was in the temple, in the holy of holies,  
 with very limited access, with strict boundaries

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But Jesus' declaration "I am" shifts the Jewish perspective of God

From God as a static being

Toward God's presence here, now, then, and there... everywhere and  
 always

From God as separate from the impurities of life

Toward God reigning in the midst of those impurities...

Moving and flowing and changing lives

This moving and flowing is not controlled or contained

God cannot be threatened, even by the most impure and powerful force of  
 death

But the power of God, through the person of Jesus, is breaking all of the  
 "rules"

This threatened to shatter how the region of Judea, the communities of  
 Bethany, and Jerusalem, understood how the world worked

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We are not so unlike the Pharisees and people of Judea

We prefer logic and reason over the supernatural

We prefer boundaries, control and predictability

We think we all ready know and understand how the world – and God -- work

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So today Jesus challenges us as much as he challenges the people two thousand years ago

What if you don't know?

What if God is so powerful that God remains connected to us always and through all things

Through hunger, thirst and injustice

Through sickness, pain and hurt

Through immobilizing fear and anxiety

Through rejection, isolation, and losing our way

Even through death

Jesus demonstrates today, and throughout his ministry, that NOTHING separates us from God

“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.” (Jn 11:25)

God's power is always flowing, transforming, **resurrecting** US from the depths of our selves

And we are connected to this divine, supernatural power of God

If we allow it

If we are open to it

If we accept it

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"Did this really happen?"

I don't know

But the next time I pray for a miracle

Maybe I'll think...

It's all ready happened

Maybe I'll realize...

God is with me still, even now

Maybe I'll wonder...

What will God do with me next

Maybe I'll believe

The divine can crash through what I think I know is possible

Maybe I'll realize

What living really means

Amen.