



## The Book of Signs - Week 7

### Week 7, Day 1

#### **John 11:1-3, 28-32**

*<sup>1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."*

*<sup>28</sup> When 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." <sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup> The 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. <sup>32</sup> When 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."*

#### **Understanding the Text:**

*If only you were paying attention, God, then this wouldn't have happened. If only you loved and cared about me, then Lazarus wouldn't be dead. Where were you? I thought you cared about us.*

That is, essentially, what Mary accuses Jesus of in this passage. She shows appropriate reverence when she greets him by kneeling before him, but she immediately accuses him of being the reason her brother is still dead.

How many of us, too, have pressed God with similar charges when things in our lives fall apart? If only...

Jesus' response (which is the focus of tomorrow's devotional) is not a rebuke as one might expect to receive from a person being accused of something awful. He doesn't fuss at Mary for questioning him. He lets her express her grief and pain through lament.

About forty percent of the psalms are songs of lament. There is an entire book in our Old Testament – aptly named Lamentations – that is a poem of lament over the destruction of Jerusalem. We tend to shy away from lament because we often feel like it shows too much doubt in God.

Lament may seem like it is the opposite of worship, but it is actually an act of the faithful. Mary's honesty with Jesus built a bridge between them. Had she held back her true feelings or ignored Jesus, it would have created a chasm that would eventually become uncrossable.

If things in your life aren't going well – if your marriage is falling apart or you have lost your job or your child has cancer – you could choose to turn your back on God. In fact, you might interpret those circumstances as God not existing. But the act of lament shows that you have faith that God is there and that God is good. Lamenting says, "Lord, this is too much for me, but I know that it is not too much for you."

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Have ever you found yourself crying out to God some variation of "if only you were paying attention, then this wouldn't have happened."?
2. Read Hebrews 4:15. How does that verse provide comfort when we are angry at our life circumstances?
3. What does it mean to wait in hope?

## **Week 7, Day 2**

### **John 11:33-36**

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup> He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

### **Understanding the Text:**

Where, O Death, is thy sting? To quote Annie Dillard from her novel *The Living*, "it's just about everywhere, seeing as you asked." Indeed, it is. Death is everywhere and it is painful and there is no amount of denial that can make it less so. Faith in Christ doesn't magically make the pain of loss go away, as we all know from our own experience. But this passage reminds us that we are not alone in our grief.

In a beautiful expression of Christ's humanity, Jesus weeps when he finds that his friend Lazarus is in the grave. The root of the word "moved" in verse 33 is tied to stirring up, like the disturbance of a calm body of water or a physical sickness from one's stomach being stirred up. The implication is that Jesus is so deeply grieved that he feels physically sickened.

Even though Jesus has power and knowledge of life and death far beyond our abilities to comprehend, and even though he knew he would raise him from the dead, he was still right there grieving with Mary and Martha. He doesn't rush right to the healing but joins them in their grief. He is with us, too, when we miss our family and friends. He does not stay removed from us in our pain but instead enters into our suffering.

The Christological question raised here – is Jesus most human or most divine in this passage – isn't just a theological quandary. It has real implications for our faith and how we experience Jesus. His weeping highlights his humanity while his healing emphasizes his divinity. Which is more important to us in our grief? Consider that it is a false dichotomy altogether as both Jesus' human nature and divine power are integral to our own comfort and healing.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How does the knowledge that Jesus grieves with us affect your own grief?
2. Have you ever felt the presence of Christ in your grief? What was that like?
3. How does Jesus' presence with Mary and Martha model the way we can care for those who grieve?

### Week 7, Day 3

#### John 11:38-44

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

#### Understanding the Text:

Lazarus was still bound in the cloths that had been wrapped around his body during the burial ritual when Jesus beckons him out of the tomb. Jesus doesn't just magically remove his burial cloths. He commanded the people gathered at the tomb to unbind him, involving them in the communal process of freeing Lazarus. Jesus started the process, but it was the community around Lazarus that was enjoined to participate in and complete the unbinding of the person formerly imprisoned and isolated in a tomb. Jesus made him alive, but the people made him a part of the community.

This is just one of many instances when Jesus enjoins the community to be a part of a miracle. During the the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus empowers his disciples to join in the process of gathering the food to feed to people. In Mark 10, Jesus could have gone to Bartimaeus after he heard him calling, but instead he tells the crowd to bring Bartimaeus over to him. Before Jesus stopped, Bartimaeus had been a pitiful man not worth noticing on the side of the road. Jesus' attention to him raised his status in the crowd's estimation. They began to see him as a person worth bringing into the fold.

These stories remind us that God uses humans to help bring about God's great purposes. God is omnipotent. God's power is not just unparalleled; it is unimaginatively enormous. God can heal broken bodies, broken relationships, and broken systems by fiat... But God has called us into the work. We have the privilege of being equipped by God to seek out those who need healing and help make it happen. We can point people to Jesus, just as the disciples brought Bartimaeus to Jesus.

We aren't responsible for the healing. That is the work of God. But we get to create a community that fosters healing.

#### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Sometimes we are so familiar with a story that it loses its impact. John 11:44 says, "the dead man came out." Ponder that verse for a minute and then write down how you would react if you were present that day.

2. How have you experienced the healing and inclusive love of a community? Have you been a part of that for someone else?

## **Week 7, Day 4**

### **John 11:45-57**

*<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. <sup>47</sup> So 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. <sup>48</sup> If 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." <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! <sup>50</sup> You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." <sup>51</sup> He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they planned to put him to death.*

*<sup>54</sup> 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.*

*<sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup> They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?" <sup>57</sup> Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.*

### **Understanding the Text:**

You'll notice in a close reading of the gospels that the final straw for the Jewish leaders is different in John than it is in the synoptic gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is Jesus' outburst in the temple courts when he turns over the money changers' tables that causes the leaders to arrest him. But in John, it is the healing of Lazarus that finally leads to the plan to arrest and kill him.

Jerusalem was a part of the Roman Empire. There was a fragile arrangement that combined some self-government by the Jewish religious leaders with authority and oversight from the Roman-installed governor. If Jesus was to attract a large following, it would become a threat to the temple. He was preaching a new kingdom in direct opposition to the Roman kingdom, and the Jewish religious leaders were concerned that it would draw the attention of Rome and they would lose their current level of autonomy.

The Jewish leaders' desire to hold on to their power and authority caused them to make the hasty decision that Jesus must be put to death. They were too narrowly focused on themselves to consider his claims and signs. Killing off Jesus seemed to be the easiest solution to their problem.

It is ironic then that it is Caiaphas, the high priest and leader of the Jewish religious elite, makes the correct observation that it is better for one man to die than for the nation to be destroyed. He thinks it will preserve the relationship with the Romans if Jesus is put to death. The relationship is fraught, and the Romans will eventually destroy the Jewish temple in Jerusalem about 40 years after Jesus is crucified. What Caiaphas doesn't realize is that the death of Jesus *will* lead to the salvation of the nation – just in a completely different way.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Wouldn't you think bringing someone back to life would be praised? Why would the healing of Lazarus really cause so much trouble?
2. How did Caiaphas think the nation would be saved? What did Jesus' death *actually* accomplish?
3. Have you ever tried to metaphorically kill off a problem rather than work through it? How did that go?

### Week 7, Day 5

#### John 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

#### Understanding the Text:

The theme of John is summed up by the author of the gospel with "...these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name." (20.30-31). The overarching idea is of choosing to believe in Jesus' message. Mary made a bold statement of choosing Jesus publicly when she anointed him at the party.

Spikenard was a rare import to Israel as it comes from a plant that only grows in India and Nepal in the Himalaya mountains. A pound of this costly ointment would have been worth 300 denarii. A denarius is a day's wages, which means 300 denarii would be equal to about a year's wages. In today's dollars, 300 denarii would be between \$30,000 and \$54,000 – a huge amount of money!

But it's not only the monetary value that makes her gift so extravagant. The jar of ointment may have been her dowry for marriage. It was common during Biblical times for the family of a young woman to purchase an alabaster container and fill it with a precious ointment to be used as part of her dowry. The long neck of the jar was sealed to prevent evaporation and the jar had to be broken open to get to the ointment – it was a one-time use item for a once-in-a-lifetime event. On the night of her wedding, she would break open the jar over her husband's feet to symbolize her devotion to him. By breaking this jar over Jesus' feet, it can't be used for anything else. It represents her complete devotion to Jesus.

Immediately after she anoints Jesus, the disciples (and specifically Judas in John) jump in to criticize her. They misunderstood and misjudged her intentions, but Jesus completely accepts her act of love and surrender. Surrendering to Jesus may look weird to the world – it may even be perceived as the wrong thing to do – but if it is done with an authentic heart, it will be celebrated by Jesus.

**Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. What is the most extravagant gift you've ever given to someone? What did it feel like to give it?
2. If you could give something to Jesus, what would it be? Why?
3. Have you ever reacted like the disciples when you've seen an extravagant gift being given? What does that tell you about your heart?

**Video Questions:**

1. Some scholars have posited that Jesus was not crying from the grief of his friend Lazarus' death but because he was angry that the people *still* didn't understand his divinity and power. What do you think it was: grief or anger? Why?
2. Jesus raised a man from the dead. This is not an ordinary event, but we are so familiar with the story that we often miss the impact. When you take a moment to really think about it, what comes to your mind? How do you feel?
3. Do you long for resurrection or resuscitation?
4. As David asked in the video, are you willing to go through the hard changes required to experience new life and resurrection?
5. In the synoptics, the final straw for Jesus is turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple. But in John, it is the raising of Lazarus. Why do the gospels recount this timeline differently? What can we learn from each?
6. Do you have anything you'd pour out excessively for Jesus like Mary poured out the nard? What are the things you're too tentative to give up?
7. What do you make of Jesus' statement to Judas that we will have the poor with us always?

**Prayer requests and other notes.**