

*Sermon for 5 Lent, Year A; 03/09/08; John 11:1-45; Depression and Lazarus; by Rev. John Perry, Christ Church, Hudson, NY*

There are powerful forces these days that assail the human spirit.

There appears to be much discouragement, in our society. It seems, sometimes, there is little hope. Many find themselves feeling overwhelmed. Too many things seem stacked against us. Too many demands are placed against our limited energy and resources. We wrestle with feelings of futility: Can anything good come out of these circumstances I face? Is there any point in me trying? A darkness may creep in; a deep, deadening darkness.

I speak of depression. Depression is a hugely powerful force. Depression assails so very many of God's children, and in our times it seems especially pervasive. Many people fall under the cloud of its immobilizing blackness. So many suffer the sniping assaults of depression, from so many directions, and do not recognize the identity of their foe.

The reality is, there are indeed enemies out there. We face enemies when we lose friends, loved ones. We face enemies when we find ourselves to be increasingly lonely, isolated. We face enemies when the doctor gives us disturbing news, and we feel the stab of uncertainty, fear. We face enemies when our jobs go sour, when co-workers or bosses grow increasingly difficult or hostile. We face enemies when financial challenges mount, when our incomes are limited and the costs keep rising, out of control. We face enemies when we don't know what to hope for, any more.

We face enemies when ills in our society seem so defiant of our good wishes and efforts. When health care becomes a battle, when prescription medications devour our resources. When jobs evaporate, when children go undisciplined and forgotten, when young people perceive no future, when addictions run rampant.

And we face enemies when the chemical processes of our brains do not work as they should – an enemy hiding within that casts a binding shroud over our days, robbing us of energy, desire and will. Medical science has long recognized that our bodies can malfunction in this manner, and often medical treatment can help, but the insidious nature of this enemy causes us to delay, to resist, to deny – and we sink ever lower.

The worst of it is, that these things may happen to us, that we may suffer from depression, and we fail to recognize that ***we are truly facing enemies***. We feel bad about ourselves, we think there is something wrong with us, but we fail to name the outside enemy that is assaulting us. It *is* an outside enemy. Even when the cause is a bodily malfunction, especially then, we need to be clear that this is ***not something intrinsic to me***. This is not me – it is an ***alien***. There is great power in ***naming***. I said at the beginning, that powerful forces are assailing the human spirit. Depression is incredibly powerful, already. Let us not give it even more power by failing to name the enemy. This is spiritual warfare.

We give power, to things that we should not. In today's Gospel about Lazarus, Jesus warns us against giving power to forces that lead to death.

We are approaching Holy Week. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, when we read in church the story of Jesus' passion, his death on the cross. Today's story about the death of Lazarus, and his raising, is intended to be a source of meaning about Christ's own death and resurrection.

This is a time to be watchful. Because we are prone, I think, to give death far too much power. We give to Christ's death a glory by itself, apart from his resurrection, apart from the life-giving nature of his whole ministry. And in doing so, we give death itself a glory, that it most certainly does not deserve.

In the first letter of John, we encounter a certain Greek word: *hilasmos*.<sup>1</sup> We commonly translate that word as 'expiation,'<sup>2</sup> or, 'atoning sacrifice.'<sup>3</sup> We may perhaps think that it is Christ's death, by itself, that atones, that has brought about the expiation of our sins, and for this reason give great glory to that death. But it is not the death alone, that atones. The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states clearly that: "*hislasmos* is not linked specifically to Christ's death but to his total mission."<sup>4</sup> In other words, atonement comes from Christ's life *and* death *and* resurrection. They are connected. They *together* are what we glorify. Not the death alone. Never the death alone.

Today's Gospel is, I believe, an important counter to any tendency we may have to give glory to death, to grant death power in our lives. Just look at how Jesus responded to the death of his friend.

An important verse in the story reads as follows: *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.*<sup>5</sup>

Raymond Brown, a foremost scholar of John's Gospel, translates the verse this way: *Now when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had accompanied her also weeping, he shuddered, moved with the deepest emotions.*<sup>6</sup> According to Brown, the word which he translates as 'moved with the deepest emotions' is intended to convey the *anger*, the *indignation* Jesus felt when confronted with any manifestation of Satan's kingdom of evil.<sup>7</sup> Other Gospels use this word when Jesus confronted illnesses and handicaps.<sup>8</sup> Jesus is indignant, angry, at the forces that hold us back from the Kingdom of God, from all that God intends to do for us and with us and through us. Jesus is indignant, angry, at any force that leads toward death.

Is not depression, such a force?

Forces may be assailing you. I urge you to search out any death you may be living in, unawares. I encourage you to name your enemy. To claim your battle. To share in the anger of Jesus.

To be tempted to give death power, and glory, happens to us all.

But it is not what God wills for us.

Any time, any of God's children, are under assault by an enemy, by forces that lead toward death, it is spiritual warfare. We engage in spiritual warfare by praying; by summoning up a vision of God's will for us. Look at the vision this story offers; look at what Jesus does.

Jesus tells Martha that her brother will live again, but she misunderstands. She thinks Jesus is referring to the resurrection on the last day, something any observant Jew would profess. ‘Things will be better in the next life.’ She doesn’t recognize that there is a battle going on, **now**. That new life is offered to her, to her brother, **now**. Do we also misunderstand?

*I am the resurrection and the life.*<sup>9</sup>

The life that Jesus calls us to, offers life, **now**.

The death of Lazarus was real. The death Jesus faced was real. The forces that lead to death that we face in our lives, are real. They are not ever things of glory. They are battles. They need to be named as manifestations of Satan’s kingdom of evil, as forces that try to hold us back from all that God wishes to do for us, and with us, and through us.

The glory comes, when we, and those around us who love us and pray with us, become **indignant**, when we rail against death, when we no **longer allow those powers to bind us**. When we instead allow God to call us out of death, into new life.

Depression is just one of those forces that would bind us. It is strong. It is not defeated easily. The things I speak of here, are not by themselves a magic bullet. Those who suffer from depression, need all the resources we can summon up to assist them, to help them fight. Therapeutic help. Medical help.

At the same time, we need to realize that this **is** a battle, and that it **has** a spiritual dimension. Forces that lead to death, are arrayed against us, here. **Enemies** need to be **named**. God’s **indignation** at the forces that threaten us, needs to be summoned up, prayed, brought to mind, and to heart. In this way, we begin to strip those forces, of their power to bind us. In this way, we begin to hear God, calling us out of death, into life.

*Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 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.”*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> First John 2:2

<sup>2</sup> New American Bible

<sup>3</sup> New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1985; p.365`

<sup>5</sup> John 11:33, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1966; p.421

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pp.425-426. The Greek word is *embrimasthai*.

<sup>8</sup> In Mark 1:43, *embrimasthai* is used in the context of Jesus cleansing a leper. The NRSV translates the verse as follows: “After sternly warning him [the leper], he sent him away.” This likely is a mistranslation, as Jesus is already described in v.41 as being “angry” (see footnote in NRSV) – presumably at the way lepers were treated. Ched Myers translates *embrimasthai* in v.43 this way: “Jesus ‘snorting with indignation,’ dispatches the man back to the priests” (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis Books, 1988; p.153). ‘Snorting with indignation’ seems a more faithful rendering of *embrimasthai*, as it accords with Brown’s understanding. “Jesus’ anger,” Myers notes, “is directed against the symbolic order of purity of which this man is a victim” (*ibid.*).

<sup>9</sup> John 11:25, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> John 11:43-44, NRSV