

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our shepherd and savior. Amen.

When we read scripture, we read it in the context of where we are in our lives at that particular moment. An interpretation revealed to us today could be quite different from an interpretation that we have five years from now. Right now for me, during this Lent, the scriptures have been opened up for me in new way. Our studies of Bishop Spong's lectures and writings shape my understanding right now. I am persuaded now more than usual to view the New Testament writings through a Jewish lens; to consider them from the historical Jewish context during which they were written. In seminary I learned that studying the language of a culture helps in understanding the sociology and psychology of a culture. The Hebrew tradition of storytelling is the foundation for understanding these scriptures in the way they were likely to have been meant to be understood. The Jewish culture conveyed profound meaning through stories that are woven together in such a way that that their meaning transcends time.

One of my children said to me the other day that he wondered what people a thousand or two thousand years from now would make of the Harry Potter stories. Would they think we were a culture consumed with wizards and fantasy? The author J.K. Rowling portrays profound truths that some have interpreted as Christian in the Harry Potter series. Through the relationships that she develops in her storytelling the triumph of good over evil prevails. C. S. Lewis did that, too, in the Chronicles of Narnia series. Many readers have seen the major themes in Jesus's life played out in characters like Aslan and the Magician's Nephew. These truths transcend time, too. But the wonder of the scriptures in the Holy Bible is that they are rooted in history, not in fantasy. The stories in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament depict real people in real relationship with God, with Jesus and with each other.

Jewish storytelling is cumulative. One story is based on another that came before it. Through oral storytelling around the family campfire or table, and through the repetition of holy story in worship, these stories are woven into tribal history. When we repeat that process in our own worship, we enter into that tapestry.

The historical setting within which the author of John's gospel write the story of Lazarus is significant. This gospel was written at least sixty-five years after Jesus was crucified. At this point in their history, John's community had been expelled from the synagogue. That tells us a lot about the Jewish authority of that time. I am not criticizing them. I can completely understand how they felt. They didn't want to change. They liked things the way they were. They didn't see how they had anything to gain by taking the enormous risk of letting go of the tenets of their religion that gave them great comfort and hope, even when what was being offered might give them more.

When I read this story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, I connect it to what was revealed to me in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. I read it from the perspective of those who were put out, not by choice but by force, of their worship communities. The woman at the well represented the Samaritan culture that was excluded from orthodox worship centuries before Jesus was born. She demonstrated that through Jesus the Samaritans were being given a way to come back in to the Jewish faith. Other early Christ followers were also tainted and impure by the orthodox standards of the Synagogue. They were Gentiles. A few Christ followers were Jews who found within themselves the fortitude and fearlessness to embrace a broader understanding of their relationship with God; a new way of worshiping based on true love of neighbor.

In this story, we are introduced to a man named Lazarus. John's gospel introduces him as the brother of Mary and Martha. We first meet Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel when Jesus goes to visit them. The people who would be hearing this story of Lazarus would have been familiar with the story of Mary and Martha and they would have been familiar with a character named Lazarus from a different story in Luke. In Luke's story of Mary and Martha, a brother named Lazarus is never mentioned. Instead Luke includes a story that describes an encounter between a poor man named Lazarus and a rich man. The rich man is reported by Luke to be blind to the needs of poor people like Lazarus. They encounter each other when they both die. Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man, who had become greedy and gluttonous, is sent to the flaming fire of hell. The crux of the story is that the rich man begs to have Lazarus sent from the dead back to his living brothers to warn them of their horrendous fate if they continue to live selfish, sinful lives. But the rich man is told, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets," as they obviously do not according to their lifestyles, then "neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." (Luke 16:31)

Bottom line is that Luke's Lazarus is not the Lazarus in John's gospel, but there is a connection. As Jack Spong points out in his book The Fourth Gospel, Tales of a Jewish Mystic, the people of the ninth decade who heard John's gospel would have linked the name Lazarus in this current story from John with the story about Lazarus and the rich man that came from Luke. They likely read scripture from Luke's gospel in their worship since by then the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke would have been in circulation. They would associate that name with death and perhaps with the possibility of being sent back to dwell among the living after having died and ascended to the realm of the heaven.

Now suppose for a moment that the people hearing this story in John's day understood Mary and Martha as literary figures meant to represent those believers from the synagogue.

Suppose they understood the man Lazarus to be representative of faithful orthodox Jewish practice. Lazarus' death then would represent the death of the tenets of the Jewish orthodox faith that they knew and loved deeply. Mary and Martha were devastated that they would never see Lazarus, or their means religious practice, alive and thriving again. They felt like they were losing a very vital part of themselves. It was as if God himself was dying to them. Imagine their heartbreak. Imagine their fear. And then imagine how devastated they were when Jesus broke down and wept. They believed Jesus was the only one in the world who could and would save Lazarus and in doing that he would revive their hope, The darkness and heaviness of serious doubt was as foreboding as it was foretelling. It was foreshadowing the coming chapter of Jesus facing the authorities and receiving the sentence of crucifixion.

The religious authority of the synagogue could not, would not see that Jesus did not come with an intention to kill the Jewish religion. He came in fact to unbind it so that that the religion could reach new levels of fulfillment. And yet the religious authority refused to budge. It may have been intense frustration and sadness at the relentless rigidity of the Jewish authority that brought Jesus to tears. It may have been the emotional pain being borne by those who stood to lose so much. Perhaps it was the trauma of the simultaneous tragedy.

How could anyone have known what was about to happen? Jesus called out to Lazarus and Lazarus heard his voice. From the deep dark decay of death, Lazarus emerged into the light and life that Christ brings. Jesus said to Mary and Martha and the Jews that had come with them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Is that not the hope for us all? Unbind us, and let us go. Let us go and freely embrace the fullness of life that God offers to us, and especially offers us through Christ.

In this story that transcends time, we have to ask ourselves, “What is binding us?” What is keeping us from living fully into the person that God is calling us to be? What is keeping our church universal from living fully into the church that God wants us to be? We can only know the answer to that by being honest with ourselves. Looking at ways in which we participate in repeating less than life giving practices just because it’s what we’ve always done; thinking like the Jewish authority in this story that what we are doing is good enough. John’s gospel leads me to believe that heeding Jesus’s voice can be both demanding and daunting because it requires stepping out in faith, even when the way is not clear. Even when, like Lazarus, we are blinded and nearly paralyzed, bound by our fear of change.

In just two weeks, we will celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we must remember that in order for Jesus to rise, he first had to die. Seen through first century eyes, that death cast a bright and unyielding light on the life Jesus lived. That resurrection broke the bonds of limiting our potential for love. By God’s grace, we are now living life for Christ, and through Christ. Let each of us live out our one and only life to our full human potential - loving God with all our heart, all our mind and all our strength, and loving ALL our neighbors, from all races, and from all nations as ourselves.