

ENTERING THE MYSTERY

Lent 5 - Year A: John 11:1-45

Especially in this first year of the three-year lectionary, there is almost a liturgy outlined in the readings for Lent. We begin the season with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness with what we might call "an introduction to Lent." But then, we move almost exclusively into the Gospel of John with all its intensity and purpose of proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Hebrew Scripture would have anyone claiming to be Messiah fulfilling seven signs, including opening the eyes of the blind and raising the dead. In John's gospel, Jesus accomplishes all seven criteria in testing for a Messiah in an orderly and systematic fashion. There is no doubt, according to John, about who Jesus is and his mission of salvation in the world – salvation not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles. There is conflict, however, especially with the temple authorities and a group of adversaries, the Pharisees. And John allows us into the drama that ensues, specifically the Pharisees' identifying Jesus as a troublemaker who must be stopped. Two weeks ago, John followed Jesus into Gentile territory, into Samaria, in order to take a break from the Pharisees dogging him and his disciples. But last week, in John's report of Jesus' healing of the man who was blind from birth, he was back from his sojourn in Sychar, and the Pharisees could not leave the situation alone. They were after the man, after his parents, and after the man again. The account seemed to end when the man was thrown out of his own community. But there was an epilogue, and the epilogue provided another encounter between Jesus and the man who had been born blind. In this encounter, Jesus comes to the man; the man professes his faith in Jesus; and Jesus has the man join his community of disciples.

And so the liturgy created by the weekly series of Lenten readings in Year A of our three year lectionary outlines a gathering of unlikely disciples – Nicodemus, a member of the temple council, breaking rank and coming to Jesus for private conversation; the woman at Jacob's well in Samaritan territory, and then many of her fellow citizens in the City of Sychar; a Jewish man born "entirely in sin" (according to the Pharisees) whose sight is restored by Jesus; and today, many of those who had opposed Jesus won over after witnessing Jesus' raising of Lazarus on the fourth day. Jesus is gathering disciples, gathering credibility even among his enemies, gathering momentum – "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind," we heard from the man himself last week as he upbraided the Pharisees for their inability to "see" Jesus as a man of God. And, we can only presume that resistance is also gathering among Jesus' adversaries who, we know, will eventually use their power and take action in order to keep Jesus' popularity from getting out of hand. My high school English teacher would describe these accounts, story building upon story, as the "gathering force of the rising action" heading inevitably toward a crisis or climax.

Of course it is all this, and then some; but I don't think for a minute that any of this remains two-dimensional. We, also, are gathered by Jesus through the power of John's narrative and the content of the stories. We become Nicodemus; we become the woman at the well, the man who was blind from birth, and today, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We, too, are drawn close to Jesus through the power of the lectionary liturgy, and with all these witnesses we find ourselves entering not just the story, but also the mystery that is Jesus himself. There is nothing trivial in anything that we read; and it invites our faith and prepares our discipleship, because we live in the same world Jesus' lived in. And even though we may not witness first-hand recovery of sight to the blind or the raising of one four days in the grave, we know these stories to be true, because there is just enough grace in the world we live in that we can make the necessary connections; that there is another liturgy, the liturgy we know as life, through which these stories and this man Jesus can be woven. And in the weaving, the mystery enters us and interprets existence, providing meaning and understanding, the very stuff of what we have come to know as the risen life.

If you had asked me any time between 1975 and 1982 about the meaning of life, I would probably tell you that my life of faith ended once and for all on November 1, 1975, the day my father died. I was in the tomb for seven years, blaming God for my father's untimely death and our family's inability to connect with the reality of his dying; I acted out my grief in ways that tested all my relationships, including my relationship with the church which, because I earned my living as a church musician, I never had the opportunity to leave. My faith was a dim memory. I lived those years of grief and anger and doubt in a kind of a funk that might aptly be described as being as cold and as dark as a tomb. But there were those who would not abandon me. They loved me, even though there was precious little about me that was loveable. They stood by me, listened to my questions, occasionally offered comments that lightened the darkness and became lifelines. When I

tell people that faith is held in community, I know whereof I speak. The community of faith carried me during those seven long years in the tomb; the community of faith rolled back the stone that I had no power to roll back myself. When I learned as a would-be Lutheran that we can be Christ for one another, I knew it to be true. Love, steadfastness, and a deep understanding of the truth of the Resurrection were the first principles of those who ministered to me. When I hear Jesus call, "Lazarus, come out!" I have no trouble being Lazarus. When I hear Jesus say to the woman at the well, "the water I give will become in [you] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" I know about that spring because it revives me over and over again, desert experience after desert experience. When I see the unbounded power of love in transforming virtually every evil in the world into, as Jesus says in both today's and last week's Gospel an occasion for God's glory to be revealed, I am no longer blind to the grace of God. I once was blind, but now I see – God's power of resurrection and new life at work in the world through the lives of those whose faith leads them to act with compassion and to fight for justice.

And it is these stories, many of which are arranged for our nurture during the Season of Lent, that provide for our spiritual formation, that call us into living the risen life, that transform us from disciples (learners) into apostles (those who are sent out) whose commission is to embody the gospel, to be the Body of Christ in the world. We enter the mystery that is Jesus and we become Jesus, given for the deep needs of the world. We die with Jesus and we rise with Jesus daily, to the glory of God.

In preparing this week, I came across New Zealand poet Joy Cowley's poem "Coming Forth." It spoke to me about the significance of this morning's Gospel in our lives and for our church. It reminded me of our perpetual need to raise our hands and open them for the grace of God to be placed in them. Joy writes,

Jesus, I don't know how many times
you've called me out of my tomb.
My life has been full of deaths,
some small, some not so little
and before I knew it, I was wrapped
in a shroud and buried deep in a cave,
no strength to roll away the stone.
Each time, I thought, "This is it.
The sun will not rise tomorrow."
And hope died in the darkness.
Then, always, you came by.
First, there was your voice,
the way you said my name
as though you've always known it,
and then, as the stone was moved,
there was the light that warmed my heart.
"Come forth!" you called. "Come forth!"
And I was up on my feet, and out of there,
as wobbly as a newborn child
but filled to the brim with life.
How do you do it, Lord?
How do you always know?

Your smile lights up the morning.

"I know all about tombs," you say.

"You forget, dear one,
that this is why I was born."