

“SIGNS ALONG THE ROUTE”

Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

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I was thirteen on that morning as my parents woke me very early so we could leave the motel and begin yet another long day of driving. It was 1984, and it was day 32 of our family’s driving trip across the United States. Starting from Spokane, we had journeyed across the country to Maine, down the eastern seaboard as far as South Carolina, and then through the center of the U. S. before being welcomed back to the west by St. Louis’s famous Arch. On this morning, we were leaving Casper, Wyoming, after a long journey through American Historical sites, family gatherings, and far too many auto repair shops and “McChain” restaurants. I’m sure, depending on the particular day of the trip, my parents either thought this family vacation was a brilliant idea or simply wondered why God had “blessed” them with three children. Either way, on that morning, we were almost home.

It was a good plan. The problem was we left Casper too early. Or maybe the problem was that we could read. Because something happened when we hit the Montana border ahead of schedule and were ready to be home in our own beds, our own neighborhood, lying with our own dog. When we hit that border, we saw the first sign for Spokane; and when, from out of the back seat one of us said, “We should just drive it all,” my parents didn’t say “no” quite fast enough. Maybe after over 7,000 miles they were tired of that Volkswagen Dasher, too. But for whatever reason, they never said “no,” and that night – nineteen hours after we left Casper, Wyoming – we arrived at our home in Spokane. No Atlas that repeatedly said 892 miles were going to hold us back from wanting to be home. No amount of fatigue was going to allow my parents to grab a hotel when all the signs kept saying that Spokane was getting closer. It was a sign – a green freeway sign – that did it. And we made it home that day.

Signs seemingly come flying at us so quickly that I think most of us simply ignore them. And that is why they seem to be getting bigger and brighter. I’m sure the scientist who invented neon actually had a business degree. Signs are everywhere. Driving up and down I-5 a week ago, I was looking for signs; and so I noticed political signs, construction signs, gas price signs, clothing price signs, and “fast food deal” signs. I noticed hotels, fruits and vegetables, route markers, and wrong way signs. By the time I returned to Corvallis I had seen so many signs that when I stopped for gas I wasn’t sure what to order: a number three with cheese, a full tank, or simply to say “no turn on red.” We see them everyday; we try to absorb their meanings, but at some point, I think, signs all run together and become meaningless.

And I wonder if a similar situation isn’t what Jesus is dealing with in this morning’s scripture lesson. Maybe Jesus had done so much, told his story so many times, healed so many people, and explained over and over again just who he was that he simply couldn’t do it again. I wonder if he wasn’t tired of talking and acting. And so, when word came that Lazarus was dying, maybe what he decided to do was just take his sweet time and not worry about Lazarus. Maybe he

figured, well if he is dead and then I do something about it. . . maybe then they will get what I'm talking about. At some point, I imagine Jesus simply had had enough of trying to get it through everyone's head that he was the Messiah, the son of God; and so he decided that what he really needed was a "big ole neon sign that shown brightly and showed his followers in no uncertain terms just who and what he was."

Reading this passage at this particular time of the church year our scriptures scream out to us as if the words were emblazoned on a huge neon sign. Generations pass; but the power of an image or story is never diminished. For Mary and Martha, this passage offers a brilliantly clear message of the power and place of Jesus; but I suspect that while it was all happening, they were simply too close, too immersed in the loss of their brother, to see what Jesus was doing. But it was there, too. As we gear up for the joyous entry of Palm Sunday and the emotional journey through Holy Week, we are walking through the events of what Mary and Martha and the other followers of Jesus were just about to experience first hand. We cannot mistake the foreshadowing effect of the death and resurrection of Lazarus; but for those who lived it, the picture, I'm sure, wasn't so clear. But Jesus was trying.

And so we have Jesus saying that "Lazarus's illness does not lead to death but God's glory and the glorification of the son." But for Mary and Martha, who really care, our Bible soft pedals the rage that must have filled Martha when she told Jesus that her brother would be alive if he had bothered to show up and heal him. That is what she really meant. Imagine a woman – at that time, in that culture – coming out to speak her mind to Jesus. Imagine how betrayed she must have felt – how angry, how filled with despair and anguish. And yet she went out and said it, and the response she heard from Jesus was that her brother would rise again. And again her rage boils up, and she basically tells Jesus, "Yeah, yeah, keep that resurrection talk to yourself; that 'last days' stuff doesn't do my brother any good. He is dead." And maybe she even added, "thanks to you!" I'm sure I probably would have taken that one last shot.

But Jesus doesn't leave her filled with rage; instead, he asks her about her faith and tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe, you will never die." Martha, do you believe? And even in her anger and pain, Martha explains that she does believe that he is the Messiah. . . a sign of hope ever amid the darkness of loss and anger.

And she sends for Mary, and Mary derides Jesus for not showing up to help Lazarus. She had seen him help so many other people so, of course, Jesus could have saved him. And with Mary come the other Jews who had been mourning with her; and their weeping overwhelmed Jesus, and he began to weep. The New Revised Standard Version takes some of the punch out of this verse; but it is often noted as the shortest verse in the Bible and read simply as, "Jesus wept." And so the Messiah, the resurrection and the life, began to mourn and cry: tears of loss for his friend Lazarus, tears of compassion for Mary and Martha, tears of doubt maybe about what he had caused, tears of fear for what was yet to come for him. Whatever the combination of factors, when surrounded by those who mourned the loss of Lazarus, Jesus wept also.

And filled with tears, Jesus went to the cave where Lazarus had been placed, and he called upon

God to hear him and guide his words, and he called Lazarus out of the tomb. And out of the tomb came the dead man – still wearing the cloths of a dead man so that no mistake could be made. Lazarus, the dead man, was now alive. And Jesus told his own story.

There are so many questions imbedded in this story. Why does this passage refer to Mary's wiping Jesus's feet with her hair when that event hadn't yet happened? Do friends of Jesus get special treatment when they are ill? What emotions filled Jesus? All of these are interesting questions to consider, but they largely distract us from the power of these events. This is a story of signs, not the kind we are overwhelmed by, but the ones that we often shrug off as coincidence or luck. The story of Lazarus is a story filled with signs that tell of two worlds: one that is ultimately not much more than a beautiful cemetery, and another that is filled with the promise of resurrection, new life, and endless possibility. The story of Lazarus is about being called by God and not missing the signs; about having many chances and, hopefully, at some point, beginning to understand the many possibilities of life in relationship to God and shared ministry with God.

For Mary and Martha and all those who witnessed Lazarus emerging from the tomb, this story is about that one moment in front of what should have been a dark and stinking cave – the one moment of redemption for them and for their relationship to him. But for us it is about preparing ourselves once again for the events of Holy Week, and once again answering how we are going to respond to God's miraculous workings, God's people, and God's call to each one of us.

At my ordination, the Rev. Paul Foreman was charged with giving the invitation to the offering which was taken to support conference seminary scholarships. He asked people to consider three things at that time: giving a larger amount than they would normally do so that seminarians would have less debt and more options when they began seeking jobs; praying for ministers and churches of the United Church of Christ; and, finally, to consider what ministry they were called to and to do something about it.

That third part has stuck with me, because I hadn't thought of the "invitation to offering" as a place to solicit people to consider entering into the many forms of ministry. But it also seemed so perfect. And as I hear the story of Lazarus, I still hear Paul's words echoing as Martha tells Jesus that she believes he is the Messiah – the One coming into the world.

Well, we are the ones who are charged with bringing the Messiah into the world. How are we doing? I think we respond pretty well to crises situations: when tsunamis, hurricanes, wars, and drought overwhelm people, we get involved. And that is important. But when I think of the Messiah coming into the world, I sure think that it has to happen more often than just in emergency situations. What are we doing in our neighborhoods to ensure that children are getting enough to eat, enough time with teachers, enough hugs from people they can love and trust? Are we really doing enough to feed people? How can we help those who need medical and psychiatric care but have no insurance or money? What am I doing to this planet? Who pays for that bargain I got on shoes? These are just some of the questions that confronted me as I thought about the Messiah as the One coming into the world. It didn't happen once and stop. Instead, it is still happening; and thus the Redeemer, Sustainer, Comforter, Deliverer is continually coming into the world. Jesus is continually being breathed into this world, and

people are continually feeling the effects of those ministries.

There are no signs that proclaim how many miles we need to go from this sanctuary to the glory of the resurrection. The resurrection of Lazarus is a sign of what is yet to come. Where is it leading you? How does this resurrection and the coming drama of Holy Week call you? Our order of worship proclaims that every member of this church is a minister. How and to whom are you being called to minister? As the cherry blossoms fill our town with beautiful signs of new life, we, too, are called to blossom. . .and dream. . .and hope. . .and answer the sign of welcome and call that God has set before us.

It doesn't say Spokane, and it isn't neon, but this sign is calling; without exception, it is calling to each one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.