

Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year A readings)

There are only seven miracle stories in St. John's gospel. He calls them signs. And he uses them for a particular purpose: Each of them reveals something about who Jesus is and what he's about, and those who witness the sign are challenged to come to believe in him.

Today's Gospel contains the seventh and greatest sign, calling Lazarus forth from his grave. In doing so Jesus accomplished what Ezekiel had promised in today's first reading: "I will open your graves and have you rise from them ... then you shall know that I am the Lord!"

In the Gospel story Martha expresses her belief in the resurrection from the dead, but she has not yet arrived at the understanding that such an overwhelming defeat of death is present in her friend Jesus. She still thinks of it as something that will come "on the last day."

That could be true for us, too. For many Christians, including many Catholics, the whole point of our faith is to help us to live a good moral life so that we can get to heaven when we die.

But St. John would rather have us identify with Lazarus rather than Mary. To see Jesus as Lord of life is in a whole other dimension than to see him as a wise teacher or even a wonder worker who alleviates suffering whenever he can.

Clearly, that was not what happened upon hearing the news of Lazarus' impending demise. No one would have complained if Jesus, upon hearing the news,

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rushed as quickly as he could to Lazarus' bedside and performed a miracle of healing. That seems like it would have been an unmitigated good.

That he makes a point of waiting—that's the part that's harder to understand. And we find out later in the story how much it took out of Jesus emotionally to do so.

It's at that point, though, that Jesus has to be faithful to the will of the Father, and it is the Father's will that people come to believe in Jesus as the one who is victor even over death. Not just sickness, not just pain and suffering, but death itself.

That can't happen unless Jesus calls Lazarus out of his very tomb! Anything less than that and we run the risk of selling Jesus short.

This is an important lesson to keep in mind as our Elect move ever closer to the waters of baptism, and we move ever closer to renewing our baptismal promises.

The baptismal sacrament includes a washing away of original sin, to be sure, but the larger story is that it incorporates us into the very death and resurrection of Jesus. We go down into the waters, sharing in Christ's death, and we rise up out of them sharing in his life.

That life opens for us the possibility of living our life enlivened by the Spirit of God—God's gift to us made available in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

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Since this story puts us in the place of Lazarus, it would have been helpful to know what Lazarus experienced, being called out of the tomb like that. How was he changed?

One ancient tradition, going back to the earliest years of the church, says that one result was that Lazarus had “the wisdom of the ages.” He had known death and had experienced victory over it. Even though he would die a natural death at the end of his years, he saw it as a passing, not an end, and did not fear it.

Coming out of the waters of baptism is meant to imbue us with the spirit of Jesus in such a way that death and anything that smacks of death finds no foothold with us.

Jesus’ victory and the Spirit of the Lord we receive because of it provides us with the direction and the drive of our own lives. We follow Jesus by being as attentive to the word of the Father and the Father’s will as he was. We let the Spirit move in us.

Sometimes that means refraining from rushing in and trying to fix things, but waiting for God to show us the way, even if it costs us.

Our Lenten observances are really designed to prepare us to delve more deeply into the mystery of God. And that delving can happen in a most effective manner if we let the symbols and signs of our faith work on us in the celebrations of Holy Week, and above all in the three-day long unfolding of the mystery of our

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salvation of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.

Holy Week starts next Sunday! Can you mark your calendars today for the times you will be able to participate and then hold them sacred? They will be life giving if we give ourselves over to them, for in them we find our lives within the great mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus.