

Jon Hauerwas – October 28, 2018 – “Tears and Hope” Psalm 24:1-10 and John 11: 32-44

There is a television show on the A&E network called The First 48. The show, now in its 17th season, follows real-life homicide detectives in the moments after they receive a call. Someone has either been critically wounded or has died. Foul play is possible, and the clock starts ticking. As the narrator reminds us, the detective’s chances of solving the case are cut in half if they don’t get a lead within the first 48 hours.

A recent episode (Madrona Street) featured a criminal investigation in Atlanta, Georgia. There, a troubled man had lured two women to an abandoned home over a period of several months. Neither survived. In a quest for information about the cases, the detectives interviewed one woman who had a previous encounter with the killer.

On that occasion, she was walking her dog when the stranger approached her. Soon, he brandished a firearm and told her to come with him. She refused, saying, “If you are going to shoot me, you will need to do it right here in the street. I am not afraid of you. I believe in God, and I know where I am going.” The man

apologized to her and simply walked away.

This woman's testimony is remarkable because her belief in God is what allowed her to look death in the eye – or at least death personified - and, in a split second, challenge that threat to her continued existence. Simply put, she faced death directly and death did not win.

Our second lesson this morning is the culmination of a series of conversations about life and death. At the beginning of this chapter, we learn that Lazarus is ill. Our modern minds begin a fact-finding mission. What are his symptoms? How long has this been going on? Has a physician been consulted? Does he have a formal diagnosis? But, ancient accounts of such details are typically sparing. Medical knowledge was limited. Physicians were in short supply. Conditions often went untreated. Death was common.

Most of the conversation revolves around Lazarus' decline. You may have experienced something similar in your own lives. The loved ones begin to talk and, soon, the phone starts ringing. "Things don't look good. You might want to get down here. The fever won't go away. He's stopped eating." In some cases, hospice is called. The minister is asked to visit. The loved one is added to the prayer chain.

As Gail O'Day reminds us, “even though the presenting issue of the story is Lazarus’ illness and death, only a fraction of the story is given over to the raising of Lazarus. The bulk of the story focuses on Jesus’ conversations with characters in preparation for the raising of Lazarus: with the disciples, with Martha, and with Mary and the ‘Jews.’”¹

Jesus is summoned, but his responses are odd. It’s as if he has no sense of urgency. “This illness,” he says, “does not lead to death.” And yet, it does – at least in the physical sense of the word. Even so, Jesus remains in control of the situation. He knows exactly what he’s doing when he claims that Lazarus’ illness is intended for God’s glory.

When Jesus arrives on the scene, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. In response, Jesus wept. Philosopher Iris Murdoch once wrote that love “perceives another’s integrity and wills their well-being.”² This means that, in love, we do everything that we are able in an effort to be of assistance. And, in the case of Lazarus, if you have a direct line to Jesus – if he is one of your personal

¹ Gail R. O'Day, *John, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), Pg. 684.

² Debra Dean Murphy, “Poetry for Creation’s Sake,” *Christian Century*, September 26, 2018, Pg. 35.

friends – then, of course, you want him there with you. In our most urgent time of need, miracles are always welcome.

“Jewish burial did not involve embalming, as it did in Egypt. The body was anointed with perfume and wrapped.”³ Here, we find a connection with Jesus’ own burial. In verse 2, we hear, “Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.” The connections between Jesus and this family run deep. He’s in a village, two miles from Jerusalem, pursuing ministry that will ultimately lead to the cross. And we recall the three days that passed prior to the resurrection.

“According to popular Jewish belief at the time of Jesus, the soul hovered around the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to reenter the body. But after the third day, when the soul ‘sees that the color of its face has changed,’ the soul leaves the body for good.”⁴

Jesus wept. And then, he acted. “He cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’” And Lazarus, still wrapped in burial cloths, came out of the tomb.

³ *Ibid.*, 691.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 687.

Now, I imagine that many people struggle with this account. For some, “it is simply impossible to accept that the supernatural can overlap with the natural, that anything can occur for which there is no rational explanation.”⁵

Yet, for many others, “the experience of their lives have led them to accept that there is genuine mystery in the world, that the world is full of evidence that the supernatural does overlap with the natural, that the line between the two is permeable. For religious people, this mystery, the overlap between the natural and supernatural, is seen as evidence of God’s transcendence.”⁶

In the episode that I mentioned earlier from the First 48, a woman came face to face with death, and did not die. She said, “If you are going to shoot me, you will need to do it right here in the street. I am not afraid of you. I believe in God, and I know where I am going.”

Today, we gather to worship as news of bombs being delivered by mail and a gunman at a Jewish synagogue ring in our ears. And in the midst of all of that, this chaos that surrounds us, we know that we are at peace with God. For God will

⁵ *Ibid.*, 693.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 693.

finally transcend the violence. And in those moments when death rears its ugly head, we will rest in the promise of the resurrection. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.