

"The Verb Became Flesh" (2Apr17)
John 11:1-45

This is a hard Lent to preach with these lectionary Gospels. It feels like getting up after Shakespeare at a talent show and saying, "um, I wrote a love sonnet to my toothbrush but could only come up with 13 lines." I mean, just what's one supposed to say after these amazing dramatic passages? With today's grand finale, I'm not going to touch the Psalm or valley of dry bones or God's life-giving Spirit dwelling in you, though they're plenty sermon-worthy. It's just they end up as background compared to this Gospel.

And for the focus on John, again since there's no way to hold onto all of it, I'm going to try approaching it by focusing on Jesus' actions. Partly I'm recalling a classmate pointing out that in the Spanish version of this Gospel of Juan it is "*el Verbo*" that becomes flesh—the verb, an active God at work in our bodies, our lives, this world.

In spite of that activity, though, the first verbs with Jesus in this reading are passive. He listens to hear the message the sisters send. That's a decent beginning, with the assurance that God hears our prayers and requests.

Much harder is his lack of response. Jesus waits. He does not go. Last week, we observed the longest absence of Jesus in the Gospel, 28 verses where the story continued without him. Now comes this longer timespan. In fact, deathly long. The two days Jesus remains and doesn't go help can only makes us fret and feel frustrated. He said the illness wouldn't lead to death, but—unless he means something very different from the reality we understand and experience—death came.

Maybe this two-day wait is preparing us for an even more difficult three days beginning on Good Friday, fearfully fretting whether we lost

our bet, lost hope, if God is a loser, a failure, if we're forsaken. Or maybe on those three days Jesus is busy conquering death and hell. More, the wholeness of our lives can feel these long waits seeming too separated from Jesus, with no help we yearn to receive, just deafening silence.

The next verb might interrupt our discouraged isolation, even in the face of death: Jesus goes. His disciples warn that he's probably going to get himself killed (which is precisely the truth), but he goes charging into danger to confront evil powers. He has courage, and he encourages his followers. Whether you hear it as ironic resolve or the battle cry of being outgunned in a Western, Thomas says, "Let's go die with him."

After he goes, then he finds. That's an important part of his engagement with our worries and suffering and our existence. Later details will be closer and more emotional, but first Jesus comes and finds us where we are.

Following that isn't a direct verb, but is a question mark in the dialogue as Jesus inquires, prompting our response. "Do you believe this?" he asks. Do you trust me with life? Do you expect more than what you see right now? Do you know where to look for help? He challenges us with Martha to work on our theology, to keep pondering, to figure out what we believe, since that makes a difference.

That's his encounter with one sister, but with Mary, it's something else. He calls her, and she needs that beckoning into relationship. She needs maybe the chance to complain, to lament, to launch questions back. After all, our theological preparations involve practice trusting, but we trust in God and not in our explanations. It's God who saves us, not our beliefs. And Mary needs that deeper, core moment. I don't like head\heart contrasts, but she does seem to be operating at a gut level, maybe in grief of

not being able to think straight. So Jesus doesn't test her faith or question her theology. He sees her weeping and is also greatly disturbed. We, too, need this emotional God, a God who can be moved, who isn't passionless but enters our pain, with empathy and compassion, knowing our hurt by having experienced it. Here, at last, is a God who responds to us.

The next verb is famously identified as the shortest verse in the Bible. Two words. Jesus wept. Maybe it's the shortest because it says it all, that a God of constant sorrow is so remarkable there's no more to say. Or maybe it's so miserable, so tragic that we don't want to dwell on it any more. (A side note: it portrays the paradox of our faith that a similarly brief verse of two words says, "Rejoice always" (1Th5:16). Somehow our heart, our very being is in joy even though and through weeping. Both are with God.)

To continue, the crowds rightly question how the tears of Jesus matter. On the one hand, having One who understands your crying and abides with you is such good news. But we desperately need God's love not just to be sad with us, but to do something about it, to be able to bring us past it, to change things.

So change things Jesus will. He comes to the grave and commands that the tomb be opened. Even in her faithful trusting, Martha is resistant and protests the idea, warning (in my favorite verse of the King James Version) that "he stinketh." That shows this is a closer encounter still. Jesus had been present with theological questions, pointing toward truer belief. He'd been present in groaning and weeping and sorrow. But now he will face death and will not be repulsed into giving it the last word.

Standing firm, the next two verbs are conversational. First, Jesus prays. Though there's the odd sense of God talking to Godself, it

reminds us that God isn't defined by independence, as the highest authority, but is always God in relationship, in communication. The next obvious step, then, is that Jesus speaks to the dead man. Even death will not sever relationships with him. His voice, this Word of God, the active *Verbo-in-the-flesh* calls one he loves into new life.

Perhaps the summary is in his last command: "unbind him and let him go." The work of Jesus, present in our bodies and active in our lives, the task of God is love and compassion, understanding and encouragement, is constantly creating and undoing all that binds and confines you—the sin and harmful relationships, the despair and lack of understanding, the grief and trauma, the injustice and illness, the identities and histories that held you captive.

As a last word of this Lenten season, he reorients you, renews your head and heart, your gut-feelings and physical potential, assures you of his presence and promise in baptism, overcomes death, and sets you free with his love. That's more than I can say; it can only be enacted in your life.

Returning to the Lord, our God, let us pray for the church,
the world, and all of God's creation.

A brief silence.

From whatever direction are the four winds, send your Spirit
and speak words of life so that these dry bones may live.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

With the witness of renewing fire for our prairie and woods,
send your blazing Spirit to bring newness of life to all of
creation. Purge what is harmful and restore what is good.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We pray for that same purging Spirit in human structures—
in governments and communities, in companies and
neighborhoods. Breathe the breath of new life and
reconciliation where there is conflict (*in the midst of war,
for veterans and their families, in prisons, amid racial
tensions, and everywhere. As we participate in faithful
advocacy these weeks to our state government, use us as
Los Verbos to call for and embody life from death*). Hear us,
O God.

Your mercy is great.

Stir up your healing power to redeem from illness all those
who wait upon you that they know your steadfast love
(*especially Robin Alexander, Ellen Lindgren? Leigh
Roberts*),. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Inspire this congregation to honor and lift up the gifts of all

...

Sara Jordan, Izzy and Coco, Carol Jensen, Andy Mulder,
Martha Nack, Peter Bakken, and Mara

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We give you thanks for all the saints who have been lifted
up to live with you in light eternal. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Into your hands, O God, we commend ourselves and all for
whom we pray, trusting in your abundant mercy, through
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.