

## You Are Free

John 11:29-44

All-Saints Day is the Christian festival designed to celebrate the whole family of the children God throughout time, before and beyond death. On this day, we celebrate the belief that nothing can separate us from that family. Nothing in all the universe can remove us from God. We reaffirm the truth that

Life is eternal, and love is immortal,  
and death is only a horizon;

and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight." --Rossiter Worthington Raymond

The story of the raising of Lazarus reminds us of the very thin separation between the dimensions of life and death. But more than being a story about death or power over death, the raising of Lazarus is about the presence of God. It is about the power to live that Jesus claimed in this life and what it means for us in how we live.

So, the raising of Lazarus: what happened and what did it mean? Lazarus was a friend of Jesus. The home he shared with his sisters Mary and Martha, was where Jesus stayed when in Judea. There is reason to believe that it was Lazarus who, in John's Gospel, was called "the one Jesus loved." This story marks the end of that section of John's Gospel sometimes called the "book of signs" before Jesus heads into Jerusalem for the last events of his life. The raising of Lazarus is the last sign and the clearest sign of Jesus' mission of showing people how to live anew – of calling people back to life.

Jesus got word that his friend Lazarus was seriously ill. Yet he delayed coming for two days, though his reason is not clear. What is important is that, when Jesus finally got to Bethany, Lazarus was really dead – four days dead. First, Martha came to see Jesus. She said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Then, Mary came to see him and said the same thing, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Jesus saw Mary and the others crying and, the text says, deep anger welled up in him. Again at the graveside, deep anger arose in Jesus. One question I have in this story is, "why was Jesus angry?" At what or at whom was his anger directed? Most scholars seem to think the anger flared up in Jesus because of the power of death -- how powerless and afraid his friends felt in its presence. I know anger wells up in me when I feel frustrated or put down – when injustice is directed especially toward someone I love or toward me!

So Jesus instructed the crowd to move the stone covering Lazarus tomb. They did despite concerns that the body smelled after four days. Then Jesus looked up and prayed aloud "for the benefit of the crowd" and said "Father (*abba*) I'm grateful. You've listened to me. I know you always do listen. I've spoken so they might believe you sent me." Then he shouted, 'Lazarus, come out!' This was a teaching moment in John's gospel. Lazarus "came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe. Jesus told them, 'Unwrap him and let him loose.'" And Lazarus came out. He was dead and now alive. But he was still bound in his grave clothes. Those who mourned him "unwrapped him and let him loose." They set him free and Lazarus lived until the time when, like all of us, he died again.

The raising of Lazarus: what does it mean for us today? This was not a resurrection. Every good Jew knew that would happen at the end of time for everyone – until Jesus, that is. Lazarus was born again to this life. So, was that a significant event? Certainly it was for Lazarus, for Mary and Mary, and for his friend Jesus, but Lazarus would die again like the lyrics of a song by

artist Daryl Scott about life for Lazarus after he had been raised, when the celebrity had become a burden:

After the burial they just move away  
Get an apartment in Cairo and live out their days.  
He works on chariots and keeps his secret well hid  
And never talks about what Jesus did.  
The years roll along, they both get on the pension  
And he often thinks of his former attention.  
On the night he lay dying  
he calls out to his friend  
"Oh Jesus can you hear me?"  
Then Lazarus dies again.

Have you ever known anyone who had a significant near-death experience? How did it affect their life? Do you perceive that there is just a thin separation between life and death -- between physical existence and the spiritual? Knowing we will die again, what difference does it make? What does it mean to live? Jesus came to teach us and show us we have power to live fully in all circumstances – to remind us that we are in the presence of God who is always present. It is our choice to lean into that presence and live, but to do so, we have to come out. We have to let go of what binds us. To embrace that power, we have to practice the presence of God and learn to live before we die.

What is your vision for living? What does it look like to you for our world be called to life again -- to experience a rebirth? My vision is of a world that sees its future, its best life, when marginalized people are brought to the center of our common life and valued. That future may be beyond the concept of nation states. It is certainly beyond the divisions that breed violence so we can use our vast resources and creativity to gain power with each other rather than vie for power over each other.

What vision do you see for the Church to live again and to experience a rebirth? Would it not be for the same sense of oneness and unity we see for the world as a whole. In fact, might it not be for the church to be instrumental in bringing that oneness into reality? And do you share my vision that this congregation hear and respond to the call to *come out* and live? Finally, what do you see for yourself? You are being called to come out and live fully. What will that look like for you? How will you respond to the invitation to *come out* – and while you have life to live fully, live freely, and live?

We are being called to action, called to live. This past Friday evening, a group of us from Crossroads attended a church meeting of the United Church of Christ. It was a fun evening including dancers from a Samoan church in Independence, music by the renowned Main Street Band of Crossroads Church, and also the acclaimed *Grace Notes* choir also from Crossroads Church. The speaker highlighted the worldwide missions work shared by the UCC and the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. It is very interesting and compelling work. The speaker used a passage from the book of Isaiah, from the time of Israel's exile, but near the end of their imprisonment and in anticipation of freedom and homecoming.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and  
to break every yoke?

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.  
The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” (from Isaiah 58)

These were challenging welcome words to a people who were experiencing a long exile of national death and who were at last being called to life. This is God's vision for all people according to Isaiah, according to Jesus, and according to many others (including me). It is a vision to come out and live -- “to loose the bonds of injustice.” This vision requires us to let go our bondage to injustice so that we are free to act with justice in our own lives and to press for our government to act with justice and to let the oppressed go free.

You'll notice, in the story of Lazarus, that it was the community that helped loose the grave clothes that bound him. It was not just Lazarus and Jesus who were involved -- not just you and God, not just the Spirit and me -- in the process of living freely and fully. We share a journey of letting go what binds and oppresses us -- what holds all of us imprisoned. And so we share life and learn to act with justice, treat others with compassion, and be free. We do this because we know that there is only a thin degree of separation between what we call death and what we call life. What lies beyond death, that certainly waits for all of us, is the very life we are called to discover and live now for ourselves and for all creation.

Come out!  
You are free  
free from the ties that have bound you  
free to bend and stretch  
free to breathe  
and embrace life  
You are free  
to swallow and digest  
the life of God  
that is synonymous  
with your life  
This is not a gift  
that comes from  
outside you  
not an accomplishment  
for you to earn  
and thereby please God  
your mother  
your father  
or your inner critic  
You are called  
to live the life  
that is already in you  
the feeling that lives  
perhaps just below  
the conscious level  
Called to live  
by every relationship you desire  
God lives in you  
Your life is the life of God  
Living through you  
Come out!  
You are free! (*You Are Free*, Jack Price, 2009)

To this let us say “Yes” and let us so live that each of us, all of us, will live fully, freely, and with abundance. Thanks be to God.