



A SERVICE OF HEALING

(For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - John 11: 28-44 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 28) When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” (v. 29) And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. (v. 30) Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. (v. 31) The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. (v. 32) When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (v. 33) When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. (v. 34) He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him,

“Lord, come and see.” (v. 35) Jesus began to weep. (v. 36) So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (v. 37) But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (v.38) Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. (v. 39) Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” (v. 40) Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (v. 41) So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. (v. 42) I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” (v. 43) When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” (v. 44) The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

A *service of healing* based on John 11:28-44 speaks to a range of human issues and concerns. Suffering often drives individuals to petition for God’s healing. Howard Thurman maintains that suffering may prepare the spirit just as much as quieting down in meditation.¹ The primary purpose of any healing service is for believers to expect God to act to transform any existential dilemma based on their demonstration of faith. How this purpose is actualized and legitimated liturgically varies depending on one’s faith community.

Notwithstanding contrasting doctrinal views and liturgical styles, black Episcopalians and black Pentecostals each perform services of healing. Ceremonial acts of “anointing” and “laying on of hands” are commonplace within both groups. Theologically, in worship, healing is believed to be determined by God, and the minister or one mediating the process is simply a catalyst interpreting God’s workings. African American worshippers hard hit by psychological distress, disproportionate levels of intergenerational death, broken families, and physical ailments, view Jesus’ demonstration of raising Lazarus as not only an expression of compassion, but also evidence of miraculous power. Thus it may be said that a worship service of healing emerges in response to human distress.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 11: 28-44

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

When we see things getting so bad around us, discouragement is not far away. Humans shoulder pains that may involve a senseless killing of a teenage football all-star on the mean streets of LA to the toll of caring for a parent stricken with the memory deleting disease Alzheimer’s. Many more painfully endure internal wounds of psychological distress, abuse, and abandonment.

My own period of doubt and fear came crashing in due to the fact that I did not mourn my father’s death fully. He died at fifty years of age, when I had just begun college. Fifteen years later, coping with the reality of his death, I found what had been the most unsettled aspect of my life. Emotional healing is what I needed. To acknowledge now the work of God in my healing process has transformed my forward movement in faith; through our search for healing, we

encounter the spiritual presence of God which cast out our fears. Henri Nouwen's classic, The Wounded Healer, accurately demonstrates that while even ministers are wounded, their wound might very well inspire a resurrected faith.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

On the heels of a stoning by Jews who rejected Jesus' claim as Son of God, Jesus abandons safety from imminent death to respond to a death crisis (v. 22-39). By the time he arrives in Bethany, his friend Lazarus had died. Jesus, there in Bethany, extends his love to two grieving sisters who have buried their brother Lazarus. A family and community mourns (v. 31) for the deceased, and the only viable hope in their time of desperation is delayed. Jesus is late, at least according to the community's calculations. To a family whom he loved so dearly, his absence, it seemed, was not congruent with his known compassion. The Jesus they knew would not let them down. The sisters of Lazarus sent word for Jesus without knowing that their faith would be put to the test (vv. 28-32).

This narrative reveals that the tears of a lamenting community are not off God's radar of concern. A portrait of these sad and beleaguered sisters brings to mind the musical expression of the Negro spiritual, "O Mary Don't You Weep." Here, it is not that weeping is impermissible in tragic times, rather the sung lament, in the end, is the gateway to hope. Mary should not weep as one without hope. If God could liberate the Hebrews from their oppressive situation, then mourning and weeping, as the song continues, is chastened by the consolation that victory is the prize of the Hebrews because "Pharaoh's army got drowned in the Red Sea."²

To read John 11 is to see that we are invited to find our own story within these pages of Scripture, for who has not become personally acquainted with sickness and despair or known of someone who has. The hard facts are laid out in earlier verses of this chapter: "Lazarus is dead!" Martha and Mary were aware of this. Death's sting became a troubler of faith. Even those who had traveled with Jesus the miracle-worker—who honored blind Bartemaues' request to see, a paralytic's desire to walk again, a hemorrhaging woman's thirst for wellness, a synagogue ruler's petition for the restored life of his young child—were among the disbelieving in need of proof this time.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples he was deeply vexed (v. 15), but when encountering Mary's weeping eyes, he was deeply moved (v. 33). His compassion met Mary's despondency. So, the question is not whether Jesus responds to our limited understanding or points of despair. The questions this text poses are: under what authority do dead things come back to life, and why must faith be jolted by signs? This story is parabolic. A lesson follows the miracle demonstrated. Stones that block the flow of life and frustrate God's healing fountain are taken away at Jesus' Word. "Take away the stone...Lazarus, come out!" (v. 39, 43)

In our culture of death-dealing circumstances and despair, individuals in need of healing require more than what professional help and New Age spirituality can offer. While these accepted aspects for nurturing well-being may support the maintenance of physical and emotional health, in the end, they are no substitute for believing faith. If the forces of death and despair are the last

enemies to be overcome, then Jesus, life's healing balm, must be sought to win the war. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul, to make the wounded whole, and his name is Jesus.

Celebration

In the will of God, grace is to be received. In bouts of clinical depression and in cycles of family chaos, God's authority over these perplexities stand out; in sickness, wellness can come to help us to participate in God's healing agenda in the world. In our poverty, a gracious hand is working out even the smallest details of our lives; and in our sins, we find that through God, much is redeemed and worked out; and, even in death, we see with the eyes of hope that there is potential for new life. There is a balm!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The grave garments of Lazarus; the tears of Martha and Mary; a tomb; a stone/boulder; a shocked crowd;

Sounds: The angered hosts speaking words of doubt and disbelief; the commanding voice of Christ; shouts of joy as Lazarus rises; and

Smells: The smell of Lazarus after he has been dead for three days.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

- In preaching, character profiling can be a fruitful activity to spark the imagination. Martha and Mary both loved their brother and the Lord, but are clearly at different levels of spiritual maturity (see the feud between Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42). What is the problem? Ask yourself, Can I in anyway identify with these characters and the problem touching their lives? How does God respond in the lives of those inflicted by great difficulty?
- Another way to press the text for its contemporary pearls is to probe other texts where God rewards believing faith. Then ask how God might speak to today's issues of believers who require healing.
- Perhaps one could focus on the image of the "stone." Interestingly, in Chapter 10 verse 31, the text says that in anger, the "Jews took up stones again to stone him." In Chapter 11, at the scene of the cave enclosed by a stone, Jesus says, "Take away the stone" (v. 39).
- Key words/phrases in this text: Deeply moved, weeping, compassion, consoling, empathy, authority, crowd, faith/believe, disturbed, obedience, dead four days, raised, glory of God, kneeling in reverence, sending forth, letting go, cave, stone, and unbinding.

Notes

1. Thurman, Howard. The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press. p. 34.
2. Callahan, Allen Dwight. "The Gospel of John." True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Ed., Brian K. Blount, et al., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 199.