

Fifth Sunday of Lent – A readings

One of the reasons we celebrate the scrutinies on three consecutive Sundays is because doing so points out the progression involved.

The readings themselves contain the progression in one form or another: The woman at the well is led by Jesus into a recognition that her attempts to fashion her own happiness have failed, and because he can read her heart, she comes to the realization that he is the Messiah, the one who is to come.

The man born blind is healed of his disability at the beginning of the story—without even asking for it, no less! And then makes progress from there to draw meaning from the event to come to the point of recognizing Jesus as the Son of God and worshipping him.

Today we have the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead—and once again we encounter people in the story who are struggling to understand the full import of what has happened. Martha appears to be stuck in the perspective she has grown up with—that the dead will be raised on the last day. Mary, the deep thinker among the two, comes to realize that Jesus *is* the resurrection, and the life.

The readings are offered to the elect as they make their final preparations for the celebration of the Easter sacraments. The intent is that they, too, will make the journey of deepening insight into the person of Jesus and the meaning of his ministry.

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We who accompany them have another chance to let the truths sink in and continue to work on those parts of our lives which have been resistant to the grace of conversion.

We would be right in thinking about these stories as a progression from lesser to greater: healing of sin, then the healing of imperfect creation, both physical and spiritual, then resurrection to new life.

However, in practical terms, we can fall prey to thinking that the progression actually works the other way—maybe something like most immediately useful to the less innediately useful: things we can use now, things we can hope for, and then, the final prize that we can put away for use when we need it most—sort of like a “get out jail free card,” not something with an immediate use, but good to have all the same.

That’s unfortunate. It doesn’t correspond to what God had in mind when he laid things out the way he did.

Here are a few details about the story of the raising of Lazarus that we do well not to overlook:

- Jesus had just left Judea because the religious leaders were trying to kill him;
- He realizes that going back to Judea will mean his death.
- He intentionally waits long enough so that Lazarus will be dead by the time he arrives in Bethany.
- The raising of Lazarus cannot be ignored. Those

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who are against Jesus know they can no longer wait to act.

- The raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing and preparation of the disciples for the raising of Jesus from the dead.

So, here's the true progression of the stories on the three scrutiny Sundays:

- Jesus overcomes all social and cultural barriers to proclaim the good news to all who will listen. He is the embodiment of that good news.
- Jesus can make right even the imperfections of nature and, by doing so, lead those who will be attentive to his actions into a deeper understanding of who he is and who it is that sent him.
- Jesus embraces the ultimate intention of his mission: That he embrace even death for the sake of those God loves, trusting that God will raise him from the dead and give him and all who believe in him victory over the grave.

He sets up the pattern in these three events—the pattern for us to follow,

- believing in the good news, and allowing ourselves to be reconciled to God;
- being attentive to the action of God so that we can come to a deeper understanding of who he is in our lives and in the life of the world;

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- taking up our cross by accepting the adversity and suffering that being a disciple entails, so that we can experience resurrected life—not only at the end of our physical lives, but as the deeper reality of our lives in the here and now.

Jesus knows how the whole progression works, and he shows us so that we will not be afraid. We can have courage to be proclaimers of God's good news even if it costs us because God will not abandon us in the process but will see it through to newness of life.

I have to admit, this pattern has shown itself to be the most profound experience of my life. So much of what I have come to treasure has only come about because I said yes to God even in the face of my fear and misgivings.

I also have to admit that I don't make near enough use of the facts of my life to bolster my courage in the here and now. The call to embrace the cross is not done for me. St. Luke says its something we have to do daily.

If I were to spend more time reflecting on how the pattern of embracing the cross and experiencing the life of the resurrection has played itself out for me, perhaps I would be less prone to act out of fear and a sense of self-preservation.

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Once the elect have experienced the sacraments of initiation at Easter, they will have the task, a task we all share in, of making that pattern the one that they orient their lives to in the course of their Christian journey.

That will always begin hearing the Good news and being attentive to how God is acting in their lives, embracing the cross of discipleship and the suffering that entails, and then experiencing how God brings new life from that.

They will need help from us who have also embraced that same pattern and followed that same progression.

May God help us in our commitment to keep this faith alive until he comes again.