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Lazarus the brother of Martha and Mary in John

A recent study of mainline clergy revealed that the favorite genre of books for many of us is the mystery novel. My own theory is that theologians spend their days trying to solve cosmic mysteries and questions about the Creator. Theology is not like science. The same questions that philosophers and theologians were asking thousands of years ago, remain as deep speculations today. Reading a mystery tale ultimately reveals the “whodunit.” After many twists and turns, the culprit is discovered, the mystery is solved, and the criminal is brought to justice. In philosophy and theology, one question leads to another. If we have a scientific mindset, these conundrums are never resolved.

Last week’s Gospel reading in the liturgy was John 9 and the “man born blind.” The question of why bad things happen to us did not get resolved. The conclusion that this writer came up with was that while we cannot definitively resolve the enigma, we can be there for people who hurt. This week’s Gospel reading is the story of Lazarus who lies in a tomb for four days. Jesus delays in coming to see him. By the time Christ arrives Martha and Mary are beside themselves and talk about: “if only you had been here!” The first question that comes to mind is, ‘if you knew your friend was mortally ill, why didn’t you make haste to bring him a cure?’

We know from the text itself that the Lazarus narrative is somehow a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus. Most scholars agree that this was a “preview of coming attractions.” The enigma of ‘when did Jesus know He was God’ comes to mind. Sometimes Jesus tells people not to talk about the miracle and other times, he is very open. In this text it is clear that Jesus knows who He is. The Lord goes so far as to promise eternal life if only we would believe in Him. This pronouncement begs the question, “what is eternal life?” What happens to us after we die?

This “mysterium tremendum” is just as daunting as last week's Gospel lesson of why bad things happen to good people. Beginning with Eastern thought, we just keep coming back until we get it right. Re-incarnation is a very attractive and just way for the Godhead to run Her Kingdom. When we have finally gotten it right and completed our Karma lessons---we are absorbed into the eternal oneness of all and don't have to live another time. This is Nirvana or Samsara. Sounds very similar to the Christian heaven. It just takes many, many lifetimes and incarnations to get there.

Going to heaven to be with the Lord and our loved ones who went before us is at the core of Christian theology. The Bible has lots of clues about the next reality but not much specificity. We know from Revelation that only perfect bliss occurs with “no tears or death or sadness.” Jesus says that when we arrive, we will not marry but we will live as angels. All we can really say is that heaven is a wonderful place and that it is eternal. Jesus and Paul tell us that we can't get there by any of our actions. We go to heaven by believing in the one that the Father has sent. The work is simply to believe! Many of us do continue to try earning our way to heaven but that is not what the Bible teaches. When we see someone not working for the Kingdom and we are, we get upset and are reminded of the afternoon employee in the Jesus parable who receives the same paycheck as the man who worked all day! James would write that faith without works is dead. Martin Luther wanted the book of James taken out of the Bible during the reformation. Yet, logically, we have probably never met a Christian who is not working for the Kingdom in some capacity.

When do we go to heaven? Another great question. There are two major theories about this. One based on Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Paul would write that we are asleep until Jesus comes. The second concept based on what Jesus says to the

thief on the cross next to him: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” This would mean that as soon as we die, we join Jesus in Heaven. It seems to me that whether we sleep until the second coming or we immediately go upon our death doesn’t really matter. Anyone who has experienced anesthesia can tell us that when we wake up after surgery, it seems as though only moments have gone by.

Theological speculations aside, there is some great teaching for us as we lead our lives. A wonderful analogy between Lazarus, who is wrapped up and mummified until Jesus sets him free. We get to ask ourselves concerning what bandages and ego mummifying enterprises need to be taken away by Christ and our prayers in order to experience our best life. Dwight Moody would tell us that: “I will be more alive than I have ever been after I die.” A life lived as a serious disciple of Christ allows us to be more alive everyday culminating in being totally and completely alive in Christ when we arrive at the heavenly gates.

In the meantime, we find the eternal now in this life. It is a shame to live in misery waiting for heaven when Jesus the Christ is with us now. He promises to send us His Spirit to pray for us even when we don’t know WHAT to pray for. Jesus, the Christ is a God of the present moment and to wait until the end of life to experience Him in the fullness of today. For those of us who are believers, everyday can be: “with Me in paradise.”

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