

## **John 11**

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2 This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill."

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." 5 Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. 6 When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was. After two days, 7 he said to his disciples, "Let's return to Judea again."

8 The disciples replied, "Rabbi, the Jewish opposition wants to stone you, but you want to go back?"

9 Jesus answered, "Aren't there twelve hours in the day? Whoever walks in the day doesn't stumble because they see the light of the world. 10 But whoever walks in the night does stumble because the light isn't in them."

11 He continued, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up."

12 The disciples said, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get well." 13 They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus' death.

14 Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. 15 For your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there so that you can believe. Let's go to him."

16 Then Thomas (the one called Didymus) said to the other disciples, "Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus."

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. 19 Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

28 After she said this, she went and spoke privately to her sister Mary, "The teacher is here and he's calling for you." 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Jesus. 30 He hadn't entered the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were comforting Mary in the house saw her get up quickly and leave, they followed her. They assumed she was going to mourn at the tomb.

32 When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."

33 When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. 34 He asked, "Where have you laid him?"

They replied, "Lord, come and see."

35 Jesus began to cry. 36 The Jews said, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

38 Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days."

40 Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?" 41 So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. 42 I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me." 43 Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go."

45 Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

## Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Welcome to the last week in our series on Spiritual Storytelling. We've talked through four different elements of our stories thus far, so before we conclude, let's review them. First, **in order to tell God's story, we've got to know God's story**. The only way we're going to tell a story that helps people get to know God more is if we know the Biblical story and we can talk about how God has shown up in our own lived experiences. This leads to the next step. **We've to find the places where our stories and God's story intertwine**, where God's Gospel weaves into the fabric of our lives, and share from that place. What makes our story spiritual is the presence of God's spirit. To tell stories like that, we need to take the next step and **be courageous in telling our stories**. In other words, we must tell those stories that have deep value, that

mean the most to us, even if they come from uncomfortable places or we're not used to telling stories like this. And since God is both the main character and the purpose of this story, we must **use God's name when we tell God's story**. For people to meet Jesus, we've got to tell them about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit's activity and work in our lives. In our stories, we've got to speak God's name, give God credit, and follow God's call.

Just as we make explicit God's name as we tell our stories, so too we must make obvious our invitations. That's the culmination of spiritual storytelling: **invite others into God's story**. Not only should these stories find the place where our story fits with God's story, but they should be made to create space for more people to join stories of meaning.

We shouldn't gloss over the centrality of significance here. People want to join stories that mean something, stories that are significant. Throughout the 11th chapter of John's Gospel, we find

invitations offered to meaningful events. Jesus first receives an invitation to return because of Lazarus's illness. He then invites the disciples to return with him to Judea despite the desire of the Pharisees to kill him. Thomas, knowing the deadly prospect of this journey, invites the other disciples to undertake the journey with a dose of realism: "let us go so that we may die with him."

We hear of Jesus inviting Mary into a conversation, and Mary and Martha invite Jesus to see Lazarus's dead body with a simple, "come and see." Jesus invites to the disciples to roll the stone away, challenging their fear of Lazarus's decomposing body. Each of these invitations speaks to something of significance, to something where people will find deeper meaning.

But the most significant of invitations is the last one, the one from Jesus to a corpse: *Lazarus, come out!* Leave behind death and return to life. Rediscover your breath, your strength, your voice. Find new opportunities where existence seemed

impossible. Come out into the light, leaving behind the shadows of the grave. Leave behind the stench of rotting flesh and find the Spirit of the Living God knitting sinews back upon your bones.

*Lazarus, come out!* is God's invitation to all of us: leave death behind and leap into life.

What makes this invitation so powerful isn't just that Lazarus is asked, or even that Jesus is asking, but it's the content of the request. Jesus is speaking to a man bound by the physical confines of the grave, by the metaphysical confines of death, and saying that there's still life possible. Jesus speaks meaning into places apparently devoid of meaning, or where the meaning seems bound only to sorrow. Jesus speaks possibility into places of impossibility. The invitation that Jesus offers is unique because it's life-giving both for the giver and the receiver. Jesus's tears are comforted by the presence of Lazarus, and Lazarus's life is restored by the presence of Jesus.

What kind of invitation could you offer that's this meaningful, that's life giving for you and life giving for others, that deepens everyone's interaction God's story? Could an invitation to become a part of this community be that meaningful?

Let me ask another question, and let's be clear, this is rhetorical: if you don't believe this faith community, that church in general, is that meaningful, then why are we here? Why are you here? The purpose of this place, and of any church, is simple: to reconnect people with the God who gave them bodily life, so that they might discover abundant life, everlasting life, eternal joy in their present and future existence. That's why we gather around communion, where the body and blood of Jesus put the holiness of God within our very DNA. That's why we gather around baptism, where the Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation brings new waters of life into the dry bones of our sin. Everything from yoga to grief groups to advocacy and inclusion for people at

the margins to celebrating God's presence in art and through artists should be telling the same essential story with that core invitation: because of Jesus, we can leave death behind and leap into life, the life that only Jesus can offer. Jesus offers it to us, and through our stories, means to offer life to everyone, to all creation. That kind of meaning permeates our life together, so let's actively share that meaning with others.

Now's the time for us to take seriously what we say we believe, seriously enough to tell our stories and invite people into them. The precise reasons that we don't invite people are complex and personal. Maybe we struggle to believe others will want to be here. Maybe we doubt the life giving potential within our faith and fellowship. Maybe we're afraid to be turned down. But look again at Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus wept over the brokenness of relationship, the absence of Lazarus from his life, and the absence of life from Lazarus's existence. The right



invitation brought Lazarus from the grave, turned God's mourning into celebration at his friend's return. The life force of God can flow through our invitations. Don't underestimate what God can do through your invitation to someone to come out and live life with a church community.

Now you might remember a study that I told you about earlier this year about church growth. It's called *Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy*, and its findings bear repeating. Churches that grow, no matter their denomination or politics, have these things in common: they believe God's actively at work in their lives, they believe other people would discover deeper meaning to their lives as a part of their church, they believe the Bible is valuable enough to read on a regular, often daily, basis, and they actively invite others to be a part of that community. In other words, they find deep meaning in their faith

communities, and they try to share that meaning with other people.

So, friends, we've now got that opportunity. We're coming up on the most important week in the church year - we call it Holy week, after all - with five opportunities to worship in eight days. And, wouldn't you know it, we've got something to help you tell our story and invite people into the meaningful work of God through Christ Lutheran Church. We printed these signs that have our worship times for every service between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. For all of us, we know someone - and in all likelihood, many someones - who aren't connected to church communities. More specifically, we know some people who are stuck in tombs that are squeezing the life out of their lives. So, my commitment to you is this: I will invite someone who's not usually here to join us in worship sometime during Holy Week, and I'm asking that each of you do the same thing. It's a wonderful

opportunity to show people why we do what we do. This gives them - and you - all the information needed for when to show up on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Easter Vigil, and Easter Sunday. And these are going to be cool services. Palm Sunday, we're going to gather outside in the Memorial Garden to bless the palms with our Presbyterian and Episcopalian siblings in Christ. Maundy Thursday we'll have the stripping of the altar, always a powerful moment. Good Friday will be the Stations of the Cross drawn from Scripture, including art for each station from Southeast Africa. The Easter Vigil will start with a fire outside, an honest to goodness campfire, from which we'll light the Christ Candle that signifies Christ's light conquering the shadows of the grave. We'll have the full Easter proclamation and rehearse the Hebrew prophecies that foretold God's goodness, which we find most fully in Christ Jesus.

Many of us find deep meaning here, and we want others to find the kind of fulfillment we experience as a part of Christ's community at CLC. But people won't know what we've got to offer, and more importantly what God's got to offer through us, unless we tell them about it. We can't expect people to know our story unless we share our story. We need to tell our stories.

There's so much good to invite people to experience in this community, and this is a good way to introduce them to the one who gives us our meaning: Jesus Christ. And indeed, that's the meaning we want to share. Jesus is the story we need to tell and the significance that makes us all significant. So, friends, it's time to take on one more Lenten discipline. Let's put this sermon series into practice. You know the story. You can find where that story fits with others' stories. You can be courageous. You can use God's name. And yes, you can invite others to join the story. We've got a story to tell, and that story speaks some powerful,

simple words to us, even as we lie in the graves the threaten our  
lives: Come out. Leave death behind and leap into life. Amen.