

Fifth Sunday in Lent

SO THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

John 11:1-45

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

11:1Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 3The sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Mary and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again?" 9Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." 14Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead." 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 17When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him. 23Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who

believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." 28When 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." 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 32When 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." 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus 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." 40Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I 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." 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44The 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." 45Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him."

[The text above is abbreviated, omitting vv. 2, 11-13, 16, 30-31. The raising of Lazarus was Jesus' final messianic "sign"

prior to his passion, and the catalyst for the Jewish leadership to silence him; see vv. 46-53.]

DIAGNOSIS: Death and Dying

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Irretrievably Dead

Lazarus of Bethany, whom Jesus “loved” as a friend (v. 3 *phileo* in Greek; and elsewhere except v. 5), became ill. Jesus did not immediately intervene, and Lazarus died. Nonetheless, Jesus said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (v. 4). Jesus’ decision to delay his departure was because he “loved” (v. 5 *agapao* in Greek; only here) Mary and Martha and Lazarus. The delay was calculated to make sure that Lazarus was, indeed, quite dead. [In Jesus’ day, one’s life-spirit was thought to hover about the grave for three days, after which the living could be certain that the deceased would not revive (that is, prior to the resurrection on the last day, v. 24).] But death, for Jesus, does not have the last word; nor is death the worst human indignity: “For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe” (v. 15).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Stumbling in the Dark

Mary and Martha were sure that Jesus, if he had been there, would have prevented their brother from dying (vv. 21, 32). In spite of their outward confession, that Jesus is Lord, Messiah, and Son of God (v. 27), they were still stumbling in the dark (vv. 9-10). They could not see any other Jesus than the one who could bring Lazarus back to life (v. 22). They were stricken with faithlessness—the sickness that leads to death, being unable to recognize in Jesus the face of the glory of God.

Therefore Jesus' power was put to the test. Since Lazarus had been in the grave more than three days and had lost his life-spirit, Martha resigned herself to the irretrievability of Lazarus. But Jesus, walking in the light, was not intimidated: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (v. 40).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Without Jesus*

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and many who saw it "believed in him" (v. 45), that is, "in what he had done . . . performing many signs" (11:46-47). Yes, Lazarus was raised but he was still sick with the same faithlessness for which he had died. A miracle or two, or even a thousand miracles, cannot cure the sickness that leads to and is "bound" (v. 44) by the irretrievability of death. Pity those who only have—or only trust—Jesus the miracle-worker!

PROGNOSIS: Resurrection and Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Glory of God*

Jesus was not sent into the world to raise the dead, but rather to save the world from mistrust and an irretrievable life without God. Jesus did this by taking into himself the world's incessant grab for self-sustaining life—and crucifying it, trumping its final reality-death—with that invincible bond of trust by which the Father had sent the Son (vv. 41-42; 3:16). This merciful act, not some raw miracle, is the glory of God and the secret of Jesus' declaration and promise: "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (vv. 25-26).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Alive In Faith*

Jesus' question to Martha, "Do you believe this?" (v. 26, *pisteuo* in Greek, variously translated as faith or trust /entrust or believe) is better understood as, "Do you trust me?"

or “Do you believe in me?” This is a very personal question. Martha is asked to trust in Jesus, not to second-guess him with honorific titles (that tend to box Jesus into preconceived categories). Only faith in Jesus—not in his miracles—can see the glory of God (see 12:37-43). Because Jesus himself is “the resurrection and the life” he can promise it to others (“so that you may believe” in him v. 15) even when he is no longer here. Against such faith, death is no obstacle. With such faith, one walks in the light and does not stumble (vv. 9-10).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Alive Though Still Dying*

Walking in the light does not mean that death is no longer a reality, but it does mean that death, (from which life is no longer irretrievable), does not control us. The avoidance of death is no longer our chief concern. Because we no longer “stumble” against the rock of self-preservation, we no longer need Jesus to be physically among us (he is immediately present in our faith). Although we are still dying because we are still sinners, we do not pin our hopes on miracle cures; there are none as enduring as faith! Trusting in Jesus only, we are now free to risk everything (by holding onto nothing) for the well-being of others, so that they, too, may believe. By walking in the light of the glory of God, the face of Jesus continues to shine upon the world.