

“L.I.G.”

All Saints Sunday

John 11

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Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

On All Saints Sunday the lectionary takes an excursion from the Fall flow into some texts that speak of life and death and eternity. This passage from John tells of the raising from the dead of Jesus' friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha. In the gospel of John there is a framework of seven miracles that Jesus does – John calls them signs - starting with Jesus turning water into wine at wedding in Cana all the way to this final and culminating sign of raising Lazarus in the town of Bethany. We pick up this story a ways into it – Jesus has heard of Lazarus being ill, but delays coming to Bethany even though Jesus says he knows Lazarus will die. Jesus has met Martha – he has said to her ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ – and now the other sister Mary comes to meet Jesus...

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.”

“L.I.G.” – do you know what that acronym stands for? In the brave new world of email & texting there's shorthand for a lot of things: LOL = “laugh out loud”; BRB & TAFN = be right back & that's all for now; or even ROTFLOL (rolling on the floor laughing out loud). There are hundreds of acronyms and abbreviations, but it's unclear if LIG has made it onto the everyday list (and my teenage daughters would tell you it hasn't and that I'm just making it up!) But I say that LIG stands for Life Is Good, and whether or not that LIG acronym is widely known, the phrase Life Is Good has become quite popular, particularly through a t-shirt company. It's a clothing line with various cheerful scenes and cute stick figures, and they all say “Life Is Good”. I have a couple of the T-shirts...I like 'em – and now you also get hats and towels and sweatshirts and dresses and mugs - all sorts of things. Life is Good – people like that – LIG.

And then there's “LS” – which is even more questionable for the accepted acronym list – but LS refers to a response to the LIG movement – LS: Life Stinks. As the Life Is Good t-shirts became more popular, another company decided to start a parody in response – the company makes t-shirts that have amazingly similar colors and stick figures as the Life Is Good brand, but instead the scenes are of people falling out of hammocks, catching garbage instead of fish, and getting stopped

for speeding, and other such unpleasant events – and each scene says: “Life Stinks” ...the language is a bit stronger than that, but “Life Stinks” is sufficient here to get the point across.

LIG or LS...what do you think? Life Is Good or Life Stinks? The LIG folks say some optimism about life is...good! It’s an encouragement to people to celebrate life’s finer moments and look on the bright side. The LS folks say a bit of cynicism is a more fitting outlook on life; being too smiley about everything is unrealistic and actually a bit annoying. LIG or LS?

I’ll let you mull that over for a bit and return to it later. But let’s make an abrupt shift and turn to the story we heard today from the Gospel of John – the resurrection of Lazarus. It is an amazing story – a most remarkable miracle – it is the culmination of Jesus’ message and ministry. But I’d like to ask you another question...(I’m full of questions today!). Have you ever wondered why it is that Jesus performs this miracle? You may remember that in the story Jesus says he is doing this to bring glory to God and so that people may believe in Jesus – but what I mean is why would he do THIS miracle to accomplish that? I know it is an amazing thing, to raise someone from the dead, but I thought the point of what Jesus was doing in his ministry was to talk about was eternal life – it’s mentioned again and again in John – much more than all the other gospels, actually – eternal life, eternal life. So wouldn’t the thing for Jesus to do in the case of the death of Lazarus be to speak to the crowds of how Lazarus DID believe in Jesus and so now Lazarus was fortunate to have this life ended and to be rewarded with eternity? Lazarus has eternal life! I thought that was the whole point – so why bring Lazarus back to life at all? It seems a strange thing for Jesus to do if the whole point is just to get to eternal life...

Maybe that seems strange to you to wonder about it that way – but doesn’t it seem sometimes that’s how Christianity is characterized or describes itself: simply being a ticket to eternal life and we are biding time ‘til then? But Jesus chooses to do this miracle – this culminating miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead – bringing him back to life, temporal life...so it seems there must be something different being expressed here about life and death and eternal life. And I came upon a comment this week about some of the language used in this story that provides a path into what that may be.

When Jesus comes to Bethany and meets Mary and Martha and deals with the reality of Lazarus’ death – we’re told that Jesus is deeply moved, that he cries – Jesus is sad and grieves this death of one he loves – and that is a striking detail in itself; but we’re also told two times here that Jesus is “greatly disturbed” – which makes it sound like just another way of talking about Jesus’ sadness. But with all due respect to the NRSV translators, that doesn’t seem to be the best translation – because when that word is used in other situations in the gospels and in the writings of that time ~ *embrimaomai* ~ it actually expresses a sense of anger – of being upset, frustrated, indignant. So then, what is Jesus angry about?

Remember, Jesus had delayed coming here; he indicates he knew that Lazarus would die and that sets the stage for this miracle. But as Jesus arrives to the situation, Jesus encounters the reality of death with its full force – and Jesus feels not only sadness as part of the grief of the situation but also this anger, this indignation – and it seems to me this anger is directed toward death itself – the anger of encountering a foe that has brought harm to someone you love. Death makes Jesus angry.

I don’t know all the mysteries of life and death; I know you’d worry if I thought I did. But here’s what I believe I do know: God created this world with the intention for a fullness of life both within time and beyond time, and it seems to me in this world that while in some ways death is a

natural part of the circle of life, that's not the whole story. Death as we know it now also has a dynamic to it that expresses a deep brokenness, a fracturing of the good – not natural, but an insidious evil that has a grip on this world in many ways. When Jesus reacts to the stark reality of Lazarus' death, it is an encounter with that dynamic of death as well – of what is untimely, and unjust, and broken in God's world and in life. And Jesus feels sadness and anger at that reality, because it is not how things are meant to be – not how God created things to be. I do not understand all the mystery of that – but I know we see in Jesus, God with us, in his humanity and divinity together, an encounter of life and death, life against death, life over death.

So I think that means that just asking 'LIG or LS – Life Is Good or Life Stinks?' – that's not nearly enough – not the way those things are expressed on t-shirts, of some pleasant scenes or some irritating events. The picture here is much broader and deeper. What Jesus expresses through the sadness and anger he feels, and through the very act of raising Lazarus back to THIS life, is the goodness and gift of life now – GOOD in the sense going all the way back to the beginning of creation – God declared this world and life GOOD – VERY GOOD. The mystery and truth of this life is that we are not just biding time – we can feel in our hearts and bones and minds and souls that this life is a miracle to receive and behold and embrace. Which also means we feel the sadness and anger of life that is broken – both when life is diminished and when death ends this life – both for us and for others. We are 'greatly disturbed' – angry, indignant, frustrated by the power of death. And with that goodness and brokenness, we long for a wholeness to life. And then we see Jesus, not only valuing life, not only grieving and angry in face of death, but Jesus with power over death – Jesus as the power of life itself – the resurrection and the life.

It is All Saints Sunday – on All Saints Day itself! This is a day about death – and about life – about sadness and grief and anger – about resurrection and hope – about the goodness of life we know and the brokenness we encounter. On this day, part of the twisted power of death we can have unmasked is that we have become conditioned to put a gulf between life and eternal life, perhaps holding onto one or the other – but Jesus the Living Word speaks to us today not simply that life is good, but that Jesus IS life – and so from the beginning, and now and always we are a part of life eternal – a wholeness of life meant for us and for all, within time and beyond.

Which means that Jesus, the resurrection and the life, calls us to this table of Life – but so do the saints who have gone before us, the faithful know we need to hear from Jesus this day not just the promise of eternity, powerful as that is; but also to be nourished in the life Jesus gives to us and this world now, so that we may encounter death's many faces with the miraculous power and presence of Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life. From the beginning and now and always, it's not just LIG – it's GIL – God is Life – the truth revealed in Jesus Christ to which death has no answer or final word. Our lives and world belong to the God of Life – and death cannot stand – always, and now. AMEN.