

Background for Week 12

If you ever watched the movie *Vantage Point* or have been part of a book club, you know that in experiencing the very same event or story, there are diverse perspectives. The gospel of John is yet another faith report or vantage point in which we hear/read about Jesus' life, ministry, crucifixion, and death. Albeit, one that is quite different in its writing style and approach compared to the Synoptics. You'll also notice that the narratives in this gospel are much lengthier in comparison.

As Pastor Dave noted in the week 10 study, this gospel incorporates extensive metaphor, using common elements from everyday life--bread, water, light, life, word, shepherd, door, way--to which people would be able to relate. In addition, the author utilizes and emphasizes opposites, for example the theme of light/darkness. The dense, strange language and long speeches can often be tough to work through, but remember, it was written to and for a community. A community like ours that has experienced fear, pain, confusion, etc.

According to Robert Kysar, author of *Preaching John*, this gospel was quite influential in the theological debates of the church's history, especially in regards to Christology and pneumatology (the doctrine about the Holy Spirit, which stems from the Greek word *pneuma* which is "spirit").

In the text prior to this, Jesus finishes up one of his "I am" discourses where he argues with "the Jews" or the religious establishment and leadership. He is almost stoned and arrested, according to them, with the charge of blasphemy. Remember that "I am" is what God tells Moses. However, Jesus escapes and has traveled across the Jordan river, which we know is the place where John the Baptist had been baptizing people, including Jesus himself (though that account is not recorded in detail in this gospel like it is in the others).

Text for this week: John 11:1-44 (*We encourage you to post your answers to these questions on our 100 Key Texts Facebook Page and engage in a discussion with the others.*)

1. Read John 11:1-44 in its entirety. What jumps out at you in the text? What thoughts are inspired by it? What questions arise?
2. Next, we'll break it down by verse(s).
 - a) 1-6: Five times within these first six verses the author has referred to Lazarus' illness, and thus sets the stage for a dramatic event to unfold. There is then, likely, this expectation that when Christ receives the news, he will respond immediately, but he doesn't.
 - 1: Notice: Mary, Martha and Lazarus are specifically named here. When looking at a few previous passages, such as chapter 4 with the woman at the well and chapter 9 with the blind man both of whom are not identified, what might be the reason for this?
 - 2: Note: While referencing who Mary is, the author identifies an event that, as readers, we have not come across quite yet. Chronologically, the anointing takes place after this raising of Lazarus, in the very next chapter. Not only is it uncommon for a woman to be named, but also in regards to the specificity of who she is. Why do you think that is? What would be the purpose in

giving us these particular details?

- Vs 4 & 6: What is your initial reaction to Jesus' statement that the illness "is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it?" What about the fact that he stays where he is for two more days after receiving the news rather than rushing to Bethany? When have you had to wait for God? What was that like for you? What do you make of statements such as: "God must've had a reason" or "It must've been God's will" as it relates to tragedies, such as serious illness or death? Do you think that type of theology is supported by these verses? Why or why not?

b) Vs. 7-16:

- Vs. 7-9: Trouble continues to brew in the very region that Jesus decides to go back to, which again sets a greater dramatic tone. We know that there are always layers of meaning to be mined in this gospel. So what do you think Jesus might have been saying in verse 9? I am still puzzled myself by his words. Some scholars suggest though that because his life would end when God willed it, no one could shorten it. Remember Pr Dave's background note in week 10, in this gospel "Jesus is portrayed as having divine foreknowledge. He is in complete control of everything that happens to him."
- Vs. 11-15: In typical John fashion, Jesus is speaking in the language of metaphor, while obviously the disciples take him literally. Also notice a couple of things: 1) how Christ speaks of Lazarus as being dead before he arrives there when he had been initially informed that Lazarus was ill; and 2) the disciples' belief does not rely on them understanding or consenting to any truths here, but has to do with their relationship with their Rabbi.
- 16: When you were baptized (if you remember it) or if you had your children baptized, did you, like Thomas, say or think, "let us go, that we may die with him?" Probably not, but that is what happens in baptism. We are united to Jesus' death and resurrection. Do you think Thomas understood what he was saying here, what he was agreeing to? Do you fully understand what you are committing to when you speak the words of the baptismal rite?

c) Vs 17-27:

- Vs. 17-18: The author wants to make sure the audience grasps the fact that there is no question, Lazarus was certainly dead, and so the plot thickens. Interestingly, many of the Jews, the people who for the most part have been cast in a bad light, are consoling Mary and Martha. Who has consoled you when a loved one has died? How have they been a presence of God to you in your time of grief? Have you had experiences that were not so helpful in your grief process?
- Vs. 24-26: Another "I am" statement. What do you think Jesus means when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life." If belief in Jesus means life, what does a lack of belief mean? Some people have interpreted this to also mean that those who don't believe in Christ are condemned. What is life?
- 27: What do you believe? Write, in your own words, a confession of faith.

e) Vs 28-37:

- 32: When was the last time you knelt before the Lord? What for? Like both Martha and Mary, have there been times you questioned, "Where were you God?"

- Vs. 33 & 38: When you hear that Jesus was “...greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...” what do you picture? The Greek word in both verses translated as “greatly disturbed” actually means to literally “groan” or “be moved with anger,” though we often interpret it as sadness. How does this change how you perceive the situation and your interpretation of the text?
- Vs. 36-37: Controversy yet again among the religious leaders-some saw Jesus reaction as a sign of love, others saw it differently. Have you ever asked the “why” question or heard someone else lament, “If God is so good, then why is there evil? Why doesn’t God stop it?”

f) Vs 38-44:

- 39: Martha, who just claimed, “Yes Lord I believe you,” who professed faith and declared Jesus to “be the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world,” is now, just moments later, questioning Jesus’ decision to remove the stone. When have you doubted? Is there room for doubt in our faith lives? Why or why not?
- Vs. 41b-42: Where do you stand on public prayer? Are *you* comfortable leading a prayer in a public setting?
- Vs 43-44: What “tombs” has Jesus called you out of? When have you felt bound? When have you felt released? When have you stubbornly clung on when it might have been better to let go?

3. General questions:

- a) What part(s) does this single event play in regards to the whole narrative?
- b) Does it bother you to think or talk about your mortality?
- c) Some years ago, the tone of funerals shifted somewhat from an entirely somber rite to a celebration of life. What are the pros and cons of each?

For your prayers:

Dear Father, we thank you for hearing us. Like Martha we have faith, we trust you, and yet at times we also struggle with it. May our questions and doubts drive us to delve deeper in our bond with you. And even as we believe, we ask you, help our unbelief. Amen.

Next week: Luke 22:1-46