

(John 11:1-53 NRSV)

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ When 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." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,

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"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus 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."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me."⁴² I 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."⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ The 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."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs."⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all!"⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation,⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.⁵³ So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

More Truth Than Intended

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 11:1-53

“You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

With these words Caiaphas, the high priest, gave the rationale for the murder of Jesus. Jesus had been going about the countryside performing miracles, what John calls signs. Too many people were responding to him. Too many people were believing in him. The whole delicate arrangement with Rome required that things in Judea be quiet, unremarkable, tranquil. Jesus, stirring crowds to belief in him, had the Sanhedrin, the priests council, wringing its hands. “The Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation,” they said.

Caiaphas, their leader, rebuked their fear and offered his solution, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

Caiaphas offered this solution, or at least it came from his lips. The next line in the text tells us, “He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation.” The meaning here is that Caiaphas spoke more truth than he knew he spoke, and that God put this more-truth-than-he-realized on his lips. Caiaphas thought that Jesus’ death would save the nation from the Romans. The real saving that Jesus was up to, of course, was of quite a different kind.

Had Shakespeare written the Gospel of John, we might have had apparitions deliver this veiled insight to Caiaphas. In the first scene of Act IV, Macbeth, hands stained with blood and fearful of McDuff, sought the counsel of the three witches. They conjured apparitions to tell him the future. One told him:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

Another said:

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Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:
Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

Macbeth feels safe, because he's told that no man born of woman shall harm him and that he will never be vanquished until the very forest of Birnam woods marches on his castle. Woods don't move and people have to be born, so Macbeth feels secure and safe.

When Macbeth later learns that MacDuff was born by what we now call a Caesarean section, he realizes he is not as safe as he thought. When he later sees MacDuff's men moving toward him, looking like a forest on the move as they hide behind the tree branches they have cut from the Birnam wood, he realizes that the apparitions had, in fact, given him a picture of his demise, not of his triumph.

We don't learn if Caiaphas ever has to face the irony of his prophecy in the same way that Macbeth did, but what is certain is that his prediction has a deeper truth in it than he first understood. And it is that truth to which we must now turn, for it on it turns an important point of Christian theology.

"[I]t is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Commonly this verse in John is understood to be one of the cornerstones of the Christian doctrine that Jesus died to save the world. In the early centuries of the church, theologians such as Origen developed the idea more fully. Essentially, the understanding they developed was this: Humans were sinful. They were so sinful that they owed God a great deal, a great deal more than they could ever repay God by their own efforts. But for humans to be saved, God had to be repaid by humans. So, God, in love for the world, took on human form, in the form of Jesus, so that he could essentially sacrifice himself in payment for human sin in order to save the world.

It is an elegant argument. But I don't know very many people who actually believe it today. It may be elegant logic, but it is also torturous logic, and I mean that in both ways. I think many of us especially object to the notion of a situation and a God which requires such a horrible sacrifice, even of his own son, in order to satisfy a grievance against humankind. To our sensibilities, that is a very problematic way to show love.

It is problematic enough that I am quite certain that it is not at all what God meant or at all what Jesus was about. I am, however, certain, I am bold to claim, that God and Jesus did mean to redeem human travesty.

Caiaphas intended to have Jesus killed to silence him. He was willing to kill one man to keep the Romans off the backs of the rest. But that was, ultimately, not

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the way in which Jesus' death saved anyone. Indeed, we know that by the time the Gospel of John was written, Rome had carried out what Caiaphas seems most to have feared. In 70, Jerusalem was utterly crushed. But what Jesus' death and resurrection did do were to prove that even the basest of human projects, even murder can be in some way redeemed.

Even here there is a good deal of thin ice on which to skate. Do we really want to say that God turns murder, or rape, or genocide into something good? Christianity of this stripe has been roundly and accurately criticized for rationalizing all kinds of human suffering. Poverty? Oh, don't worry about that. With God's help you will be made a better person because of it. That's ridiculous, and it's as bad or worse when the logic is applied to violence like rape, or child abuse or the holocaust. If these are such good experiences, why aren't the proponents of this theology standing in line, volunteering to experience them?

Horrible things happen in this world. They happen in Auschwitz. They happen in Kosovo. They happen in Tibet. They happen in Rwanda. They happen in our families. They happen in our communities. And a horrible thing happened when Jesus was put on the cross in Jerusalem, whomever that act was meant to appease. There is nothing which can take away the horribleness of it, or of any of the other atrocities that occur in this world.

But what Jesus did, and what Caiaphas said but had no idea he said, what Jesus did was demonstrate that God could take the ashes of the most horrifying desolation and redeem them. It didn't mean that it was a good thing for some bad thing to happen. It didn't mean that the bad part was completely erased by the redemption. It didn't mean that the wounds and the scars of atrocity and hurt were ever eradicated. But it did mean that the intended defeat would never be finally realized. For God looks at shattered lives and communities, and God insists on picking up the wreckage from the scrap heap and sculpting it into a triumph, even if that triumphal parade is made up of folks still limping and weeping and struggling.

In that sense Jesus did die for the nation and to gather the dispersed children of God. He died for them not as a sacrifice but as a proof that the impulse for hatred and destruction does not, does not get the last word. In the end, like a fractured bone, by God's grace people may grow stronger at the break. In the end, they may even find themselves glad for what they have learned and what they have gained from the experience.

It is a fine line. There are many people, who in the face of suffering great trauma or injustice are reluctant ever to heal the wounds. Sometimes they say that the hurt is simply beyond repair. Sometimes they say that to heal would mean to acknowledge that the injury isn't as bad as we say it is. In a way it feels like letting the perpetrator off the hook, even if the perpetrator is but bad luck occurring more or less at random, like the AIDS virus. I suppose most everyone starts here,

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unwilling to let go of the sense of outrage. I know I certainly have. But the problem here is this: If we stay in this frame of mind too long, the injury calcifies as a complete and permanent self-definition – Who am I? I am an aggrieved party, end of conversation.

God offers something slightly different, but a difference that makes all the difference in the world. God does not excuse hurt or injustice. God is not glad for them. God does not say to put things behind us, as though they never happened. But God does say, I can pick up these pieces, even these pieces, however many and jagged these pieces are, and I can fashion them into something breathing and animated. God says, I breathed life into the dust once, can I not do this? God says, I hate the injuries that happen to my people. And while the universe is so constructed that these injuries happen, unfortunately with great regularity, God says, My healing hand is ultimately stronger than any of them. Ultimately, that is what Jesus showed us.

And, so, Caiaphas was right, though he had not a clue as to why. He was right. Jesus died for the nation and the dispersed children of God. He died not to save them from the Romans, but to show whether ill came at the hands of the Romans, or the high priest himself, the final triumph was ours through our God. Thanks be to this God who saves us. Amen.

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