

Spiritual Death and the Four Days of Lazarus

The long Gospel passages these last three weeks—the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus—almost certainly are historical events. Nonetheless, as John puts these stories together, he weaves a beautiful tapestry that gives us insight into what conversion looks like and also what our catechumens are preparing for in their Baptism thirteen days from now at the Easter Vigil.

So we've been unpacking the rich theological meaning to get at, "What does this mean for me?" And as with all the readings, today's reading has a very significant sense of what it's about for each and every one of us. Yes, especially for those preparing for Baptism, but also a specific meaning for each and every one of us.

To get at the meaning for today and unpack it a bit, I want to get at St. Augustine's understanding of this passage. He wrote probably about a dozen different sermons that we have on this passage, and he comes back again and again to a similar theme. I want to share that today in terms of how Augustine understands this passage.

All the Fathers of the Church, including Augustine, interpreted this passage as meaning for us spiritual death: what it means that sin can cause us to die spiritually, and how it is that Jesus calls us out of that and back into the light and into the land of the living.

Augustine interpreted the four days of Lazarus being in the tomb as referring, in a sense, to four different degrees of sin, progressing from somewhat minor on the first day of death—when maybe rigor mortis set in—to the further stages of death. Then I want to get at how we get out of it if we find ourselves kind of stuck in that.

Augustine interprets the first day, in terms of sin, as sin coming into our thought. He interprets the second day of sin as that sin going from thought to action. He interprets the third day of sin as the sin moving from action to habit. And he interprets the fourth day of sin in terms of that habit becoming a bondage: something that we're actually stuck in, something that has taken away our freedom.

So think road rage. We're driving. I'm sure none of you have ever yelled at anyone in the car before. Never. Not even just kind of in your thoughts.

But think about this now. Someone cuts you off, and the thought comes: "Man, this guy's acting like a jerk." It moves to action, where you actually say something or gesticulate. It moves to something that doesn't just happen once but is a regular occurrence whenever you're driving. And it moves to something that you almost can't stop yourself from doing. It is such a way of being in the car that it kind of becomes your identity: angry driver. Not a good place to be.

Now apply that to any of the capital or deadly sins, which are essentially the same thing. Where in your life do you feel stuck?

It's a common human experience. And what do we do when we're stuck? Do we give up? Sometimes it kind of feels like that. Well, dear friends in Christ, I have good news for you: Jesus is calling you out, in a good way. Jesus is calling you out, in a good way, from places of spiritual death and bondage into the place of freedom. All the Fathers of the Church universally interpreted this passage as being, for us, about places of spiritual death where the Lord is calling us to resurrection.

Presumption, Despair, and the Cross

Now, there are two attitudes we can fall into in places where we are stuck. Both of these attitudes are very dangerous. They're kind of opposite, and I'll get at the way we're actually supposed to aim. But in places where we feel stuck, there are often two moves. Neither of these is good.

The first move we call presumption. Presumption means that we essentially say, "You know what? This place where I'm stuck doesn't really matter that much. I'm going to do me. I'm not going to try anymore. This isn't a big deal." That's presumption.

The second place we can go with this is despair. Despair isn't presuming that it doesn't matter. Despair is presuming that I can't ever change, that God must be so disappointed in me, and that there is no hope for me.

Both of these are really significantly bad things that happen in the spiritual life. Both of them are actually rooted in pride. The pride of presumption is: "I can do what I want. I'm my own god." And the pride within despair is that God isn't powerful enough to bring me out of this.

Both of them are prideful because both of them make it about me: I'm my own god, or my ability to live in the freedom that God is calling me to is based upon me. At the end of the day, both despair and presumption fail to take the cross of Christ seriously. Neither of them takes the cross of Christ seriously. That's why they're so dangerous.

Presumption doesn't take the cross seriously in terms of the cost: that our sins, in a real way, do damage the Body of Christ. Despair does not take the power of the cross seriously. I'll say that again. Presumption doesn't take the cost of the cross seriously: "It doesn't really matter." The Lord says, "It actually does matter." And despair does not take the power of the cross seriously, because the power of the cross has conquered the world, dear friends in Christ. That is where our hope is from.

Jesus Weeps—and Calls Us to New Life

Why did Jesus weep? He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead in, like, two minutes. Why weep? He was pretty matter-of-fact at the beginning of the reading today when He talks about Lazarus's death. And when confronted with it, although He is going to raise Lazarus from the dead in a couple of minutes, and He knows He is going to do that, Jesus weeps.

It's because the reality of sin and death—if there's any anger in it—is not at us. It's this really deep, visceral reaction to what sin and death does to us. It's a move of compassion. It's a move of love. We heard at the beginning: Jesus loved Lazarus, and Martha, and Mary, and you.

Because of that, He shows this visceral, tender love that He has for each of us. That's where our hope is. The power of the cross, combined with His particular love for each of us, longs to bring us into freedom, into the light.

So where do we go in places where we are stuck? Not presumption: "It's not that big of a deal." And not despair, as though the Lord is done with me. The Lord never gives up on us. His power and grace have the ability to bring us, in places where we feel stuck, into freedom.

That is the move: hope based upon the Lord's love for us and the power of the cross, that a different type of life is possible by His grace. And how do we get it? We simply ask for it. We bring to the cross places of our brokenness and places we don't like about ourselves. We bring those to the cross knowing that if we tenaciously ask for new life, if we continue to ask for new life in places of darkness and death, the Lord will never disappoint us.

So as we receive Him in the Eucharist today, receiving that incredible pledge of His love and grace, let us ask Him to bring us to new freedom as we approach the great sacred mysteries that we'll celebrate in a couple of weeks, asking God to raise us up and to bring us to new life. Praise be Jesus Christ.