

Our gospel reading for this week is again big and complex - too much to cover in a sermon - but there are three things I want to point out: a silly thing, a troublesome thing, and a profound thing. First, the silly thing. It's a little detail we probably overlook, but John's original readers would have gotten it. You'll remember that Lazarus has been dead for four days and he's buried in a tomb. When Jesus arrives he commands that the stone be rolled back and then cries out, "Lazarus come out!" And Lazarus comes out. Okay, great! Except... this is not Lazarus confidently striding out, a specimen of manhood in its prime. No, look at the text. His hands and feet are bound together with strips of cloth. Put that reality in your mind and think of what that looks like as he *tries* to come out. At best he hopped out, or maybe waddled out like a penguin - not exactly deportment to impress a queen. It's a bit of a funny end to the story.

The second thing is the troublesome piece. This bothers me every time I read it, even though I know the answer. It is when Jesus learns that Lazarus is sick and dying, but rather than

dropping what he is doing and going right away he waits two days longer where he is! It feels like Jesus is either uncaring of the pain Lazarus and his family are feeling, or he is playing some sick sort of game with them.

When you are in a time of crisis you want God to hear your need and respond. Not say, "Let me think about it a couple days and I'll get back to you." Does God not know or not care about the fullness of human pain? Does God have some master plan that we don't know about, but our lives have to be hurt now for some hopefully better future?

Troublesome as it may be, we do have to respect that God does things in God's own way and in God's own time. Maybe we'll understand things with hindsight, and maybe we won't. But we have to let God be God.

That being said, God is not uncaring. That takes us to the profound thing in the gospel reading, and perhaps the key point of it all.

In all of the Bible's accounts of Jesus the Jewish religious leaders don't like him and they wish he'd go away. I sometimes imagine Jesus as being like a bothersome mosquito to them. Have you ever been trying to fall asleep when you hear this faint sound of a mosquito coming closer and closer? It's dark and you can't see it but when it gets too close you blindly wave your arm somewhere in the vicinity of the sound and you hope it will go away. Maybe it does for a few seconds, but all too soon it's zeroed back in on you. At some point you decide the little airborne menace has to stop, and you decide to take action to permanently end the problem. And that point came for the religious leaders with Jesus.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke the step that that point comes is when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. He does that on the Monday before Passover. Jerusalem is crammed with people. The leaders see him as a threat and fear he will cause a revolt. They decide he's got to go.

John's gospel suggests something different. He suggests the point that goes too far is what we read today, Jesus raising

Lazarus. Interesting, isn't it? Bringing someone back to life is what ends Jesus' life.

During this season of Lent we've been looking at different encounters with Jesus: Jesus and the devil, Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and Jesus and the blind man. Each one has been different. In each one Jesus' impacts the other person but there isn't much of an impact on Jesus. But not this time.

As we think about the sometimes troublesome things about God, like doing things in God's own time, we also have to remember the investment and commitment God has in us. God's grace costs God.

Sometimes when we think about God's great power and ability we think that God can do anything for us at any time. It is almost as if God has an infinite amount of goodness that he can effortlessly tap at any time. And when God won't do it for us we get frustrated. But that is a wrong understanding.

When I was a little boy I had a friend who was quite well off - definitely more well off than I was. He had lots and lots of toys. I particularly remember the way he played with his little Matchbox cars when I visited him. Like everything else, he had loads of them. Now, as all little boys do, we'd pretend to have various crises occur in our imaginary streets. These crises were always a good excuse to bring out the police cars and ambulances and fire trucks and the like. Car crashes were regular occurrences because then there'd be a reason to bring out the tow truck too. When playing with other friends a car crash would involve running a couple cars into each other and maybe flipping one of them over to represent the severity of the crash. But with this friend a car crash involved causing real damage to the cars. He'd tear off a wheel, or rip off a door. A blow from a hammer would literally smash them in. I remember one particular time when he wanted the effect of total destruction that he took a little car outside and repeatedly whipped it against a brick wall until it flew to pieces.

Now he was not a particularly violent little boy. It's just that he didn't care about his Matchbox cars, or any of his toys for that matter. He had so many toys that what was one or two less? Plus, his parents were always replacing them or

buying him more. When he visited my house we did not play with my toys the same way. Break almost any of my toys and I felt it.

When we think of God's immense power we shouldn't think of God as being like my friend who didn't care about his toys. If we did we'd be saying, "Sure I have God's grace, but so what? God has infinite resources. It didn't cost God anything to be gracious to me." That would be "cheap" grace.

The truth is that God cares. God feels. God knows the cost. Loving you - having you - saving you, costs God. God has made a real and serious investment in you. God wants to bring you to true wholeness and fullness of life. And doing that isn't easy. That is costly grace.

God has to manage the delicate balance between guiding and protecting you on one hand, yet not overwhelming you with his power on the other hand. If God overwhelms you with too much miraculous care then you never mature to be... yourself. It is God's desire to maintain that balance that makes God willing to

suffer on your behalf - to pay the price of costly grace. That way you accept it as a gift and are gracious.

In our gospel reading giving Lazarus life ends up costing Jesus his own life. When you feel frustrated with God for not answering prayers or not giving help when help is needed, remember that it's okay to feel that way. But also remember that God has been, is now, and will continue to make a precious costly investment in you.

You don't come cheaply for God. Always appreciate the price God is willing to pay to make you. Amen