

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn**

March 25, 2007

### **A Picture of Glory**

John 11: 1-6

Most of us have heard Lazarus' miracle story. We remember that he was a close friend to Jesus but he became ill and died. We have heard of Jesus arriving on the scene, how he comforted the sisters and astounded the crowds. We can recite Jesus' words, "Lazarus, come out!" and the image of his friend crawling out of the tomb—crawling back from death—is one pressed into our common photo album: Jesus, trouncing death with his voice and bringing his friend back from the hereafter, bandages and all. This miracle is such a part of our collective memory that, today, we can visit hospitals named for Lazarus, and reconstructive surgery clinics, and even web sites that will revive our lost computer files! This miracle story is a part of us, etched into our minds.

But the ending is not the whole story. While we often want to jump to the finale, for this morning, let's go back. Let's go back to the beginning of the story and linger there for a few moments, for not many of us have experienced our loved ones stumbling out of their grave. Our lives are not often lived there. Our lives are more like this story's opening, these first six verses. While we may hold to the slim hope of a miracle, right now we are immersed in the pain of a dying brother, grieving sisters, and a Jesus who doesn't show up.

This is the painful side of miracles stories, isn't it? We rejoice in Jesus' healing of one blind man but we know there are hundreds who continue to live in a darkened world. He awakens Jairus' daughter while the boy down the street never wakes up. When Jesus heals—when he cures—when he is present and acts—there is always the nagging question, What about when he doesn't show up?

In those two days that Jesus stayed away did the sisters find themselves straining their eyes down the dirt road with the hope they would catch a glimpse of his coming? Or were they too weary to do more than weep and worry? How did Lazarus feel as he grew more feeble? Remembering Jesus' healings—those he'd told them about and those they'd seen for themselves—remembering those miraculous moments they probably felt defeated, left behind, even betrayed. Though *we* may know the end of this story, right now, in this moment—right here in these six verses—they do not. This moment is where they are living their lives for Jesus hasn't shown up and they are each left waiting.

There is a girl in my home church—Morgan. She is 16 now and for many years she has suffered from a weak spinal column. As she grew, she grew into a life that no one wishes for their child—a life of permanent neck braces; a life of living apart from others because of her fragility. A few years ago her family found a doctor who could make Morgan well. He believed he could fuse her spinal column so that she would not have to live in fear of snapping her neck. The waiting seemed to be over and a miracle for Morgan appeared imminent. This, however, is not what happened. The doctors grazed several of the nerves in her spine and, from that one moment of error she became bedridden, living her life lying on her back. Where she used to be able to walk, after the surgery she could not even sit upright. She could not eat any kind of food because the surgery so badly damaged her nausea center that she spent most of each day choking and gagging. She lost the use of her right

hand because of nerve damage as well. A year and a half after the surgery 12 year old Morgan weighed 50 pounds and lay with her body strapped to a stretcher with her gnarled and atrophied hand clenched at her side. Her family continued to research their medical options. They traveled to specialist after specialist and began new pain management regimes. They lived with the slim hope of a miracle but Morgan was suffering constant pain, her family was fighting against ever-deepening despair and Jesus, it seems, hadn't shown up. This is where she was living her life, in these six verses. So what about Morgan?

This is the question that people of faith dare to ask. It is the question on Martha and Mary's lips when their brother is gone and their hope is darkened: "Oh Lord, if you had been here", they say, which also means: "Oh Lord, where *were* you?!" It is the question we yearn to gain an answer to. But, as important as this question is to us, it doesn't seem to be important to Jesus. Not in this passage. Jesus does not offer Martha or Mary answers to why he did not heal Lazarus when he had healed others before. He does not share a lengthy exposition on the whys and wherefores of human suffering. Jesus seems to have another focus altogether. Instead of offering us the answer we might be yearning to hear, Jesus changes the question. Jesus changes the story. Instead of discussing why some suffer and others are healed, he offers the promise that illness is not the ultimate purpose. The ultimate purpose is the glory of God. So Lazarus' illness is not the point, the sisters' pain and suffering do not sound the closing anthem, and even Lazarus' death is not allowed the final word! The point is that death has lost its sting, that the grave has relinquished its victory. The final word is that Jesus is the resurrection and the life that never ends.

This language is faithful. Each of us has probably heard it proclaimed at funerals or in the pulpit. We *do* affirm that God's glory outlives suffering and death. But what does it mean to Mary and Martha when Lazarus' body has been wrapped and buried in a cave? What does it mean for any of us who are living in these first six verses, when we hold out only a slim hope for a miracle? Speaking of God's glory in this context seems too insincere—too slick. It may even feel like a theological hat trick to rush to God's glory while in the midst of the sisters' mourning or while we watch as Morgan withers away. This talk of glory is not a magician's slight of hand, though, because Jesus has shown his cards. And rather than making our task easier, his words confound us even more. Jesus tells us that Lazarus' illness is *related* to God's glory. Lazarus' family has to suffer so that God can be glorified. Morgan's paralyzed existence is the road to God's grandeur...Morgan's pain exists so that God can be glorified? No, this is not simple at all.

I can barely stand to speak the words. You, perhaps, can hardly bear to hear them. Mary is inconsolable in her sobbing and her despair leads to God's glory. Lazarus suffers the heartache and sorrow of being ripped from this world so that God can be glorified. The words cling to the roof of my mouth so painful are they to utter. We don't want to hear his words. We don't want to think about them...and yet, somehow—somewhere in them—there is truth. Of course this understanding of suffering does not represent all of the truth possible but it is truth. We cannot get around it. In fact, we practice it all of the time.

Look at Lent. We have almost finished the season and next Sunday begins Holy Week. These 40 days, and especially this coming last week, are a working out of this truth. During this time, we reflect and pray, we suffer and squelch our alleluias, so that Easter's hosannas can more boldly ring. We are called to walk the dark road toward the cross so that the brightness of the empty tomb can become even clearer. What does the picture of glory look like? What images lie in its viewfinder? To view Jesus' final glory we have to look through Lent. To at all grasp the power of Lazarus stumbling from his grave, Martha's hurt and Mary's tears must be a part of the picture's foreground.

A few years ago I was fortunate enough to be visiting this same home church on the Sunday they were offering their Christmas pageant. The children were decked out in wire halos, paper sheep ears and even dark sunglasses for the ultra-cool wise guys. The sanctuary was packed for this retelling of Jesus' birth and so I had to stand at the back. Within two verses of "Away in a Manger," however, something for me went terribly wrong: for there was Morgan. Her mother had rolled out her stretcher and she was lying behind the last pew right in front of me. While most of her body was hidden behind the pew, her head poked out into the aisle so that she too could get a view of the Christmas story.

Things went wrong because no matter how I turned my head or averted my eyes, I could not watch the play without having her on center stage. There was no way to see Jesus' birth unless I looked through her! The contrast was so acutely painful—the singing and dancing children and Morgan lying motionless on her bed and clapping with her one good hand against her leg. How could this be?

I found that I could not believe the story. If this was the new setting then the scene had changed. How could their praises be true? How could their collective glorias not be a lie with this new view?

I wanted to leave. It was too painful to believe in the one hope while coming face to face with this image. I couldn't look at new birth while living in her painful first six verses.

I cannot tell you what happened. I am not completely sure what changed but I did not leave. I could not leave. And by the end of the children's singing and storytelling it hit me. This story was almost unbearable to watch with Morgan in its frame—yes!—but the story also made no sense unless she was there. Their rejoicing rang hollow without her. The little plastic baby in the box of hay remained a toy unless I had to look through her to see it. In some way, glory was able to shine that day *because* the picture included her. This is not to say that her suffering is glorious or even that Lazarus' death was. It is to say, though, that God's glory is often not recognizable as glory unless viewed with suffering and death in the frame. When picturing glory, Lazarus and these first six verses must be in the foreground. Morgan must be looked through to even catch a glimpse. For God's glory is showing us a new heaven and a new earth and a brightness that must shine in the darkness. We will only see the light if we have courage enough to look through that darkness. Amen.