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Signs of Life

John 11:25

In Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War the first battlefield encounter between Grant and Lee is presented as a turning point in that conflict. At the Battle of the Wilderness Grant's Army of the Potomac failed to achieve its objective while suffering huge losses. That night Grant's officers heard the sound of their general weeping. He was grieving over the losses suffered by his troops that day. The weeping continued through the night.

But what happened the next day taught Grant's officers and men that this general was different from the others who had led them. All of the previous Union generals had also been beaten by General Lee on the battlefield and they responded by retreating. That is not what Grant chose to do. The next day he ordered his army to advance. Grant had already grieved over his loss of the previous day and now he was ready to direct his attention to the next challenge. His announcement of this decision was a sign that helped Grant's men to see who he was. They realized that this was a general who believed in them. Because he believed in them they began to see their future in a very different way.

A similar process is unfolding in the Gospel of John. Here we find a consistent pattern of a miracle performed by Jesus which is followed by dialogue among the bystanders who try to understand what the miracle means. Then Jesus steps in to provide the authoritative interpretation. But in John's gospel the miracles are not called miracles. They are called signs. For John, the signs are not important as isolated events. They are important because they always point to something else. John's gospel wants us to pay attention to what the signs reveal about Jesus. The signs are there to tell us who Jesus is.

One of the most important of Jesus' signs is presented in the 11th chapter of John. Jesus arrives at the home of his friend Lazarus just after Lazarus' death. Jesus is confronted with the pain and brokenness of a grieving family. The sisters Mary and Martha are devastated at the loss of this brother that they love. Because they live in a patriarchal society this death is damaging to them in other ways too. Without a father, brother, or husband they have no legal standing. Their future is up for grabs.

The sisters are disappointed that Jesus failed to arrive before Lazarus' death. They had hoped that Jesus would get there in time to heal their brother. Now it is too late for a healing. But Martha has not given up on Jesus. She believes that in some way Jesus' ministry can still make a difference in this darkest hour of her life. She goes on to say, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him (John 11:22)."

John tells us that Jesus enters into the pain and brokenness of his friends. He is weeping before he can get to the tomb. He is weeping because of his own grief over the death of his friend. He is weeping because he feels so intensely what this loss will do to Martha and Mary. But he is also weeping for the human family which cannot free itself from the destructive powers of this world. The gospel writer tells us that the sign that Jesus is preparing to perform will be a major threat to those destructive powers. The raising of Lazarus will be perceived by the authorities in Jerusalem as an

attack on their positions of power and privilege. So they begin to plot Jesus' death. John portrays Jesus' walk to Lazarus' tomb as the beginning of his last journey.

Because this sign is so provocative, John breaks the usual pattern of his narrative. Instead of interpreting the sign after it is performed, Jesus gives the explanation before. Before raising Lazarus Jesus tells Mary that this is a sign of who he is. He says "I am the resurrection and the life ... (John 11:25)." Jesus is the one who believes in us so much that he sets us free from the destructive powers of this world. His life and his priorities can shape our destiny. Jesus is recreating us in his image.

One of the people who encouraged our Governor to sign the law abolishing the death penalty in Illinois is a Presbyterian in Chicago. Joanne Bishop sees this issue from the perspective of a family member of murder victims. In 1990 her 25 year old sister, Nancy, and her husband were murdered in their suburban home. Nancy was three months pregnant. A young man was waiting for them. He shot Nancy's husband first and then fired the gun at her swollen belly and left her to bleed to death. The killer was arrested six months later and has never shown remorse.

When people claim that executing the murderer can help the victim's loved ones have a sense of closure Joanne Bishop responds in these words:

Killing the killer doesn't close anything, certainly not my grief ... Imagine if all that my sister's killer

could give me in return for my loved ones lives were his life. His death could never begin to pay for theirs. I forgive Nancy's killer ... not because he has an excuse – he has none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it; he has not. I do not forgive for him. Rather I forgive for the One who asked me to and taught me to (John Buchman, Christian Century, April 5, 2011, page 3).

That is an unmistakable sign of the life that Jesus offers to us.