

Sermon for Lent 5A, March 29, 2020, St. Andrew's, Des Moines © Kathie Danielson

I miss teaching English to high school kids. I miss planning lessons and seeing the lightbulb go off when they grasp a concept, understand a theme, or relate to a character's conflict. I remembered teaching **foreshadowing** – the presentation of details, characters, or incidents in a narrative in such a way that later events are prepared for – or “shadowed forth”. The best foreshadowing is subtle and woven into the story – often in multiple ways.

Remember the opening of *The Wizard Oz*, when Dorothy encounters mean 'old Miss Gulch taking little Toto, and as the old bat takes off on her bike, Dorothy imagines her flying on a broomstick with a pointy hat on??! And who becomes Dorothy's enemy when she lands in Oz???!?

Shakespeare loved this literacy device; you will see foreshadowing in most of his plays, like *Romeo & Juliet*, when the lovers profess that they would rather die than live without one another.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee's portrayal of racial discrimination that plagues society, the behavior of the townspeople towards Boo Radley indicates how hypocritical society is, by victimizing someone without evidence, and branding that person wrong; this foreshadows Tom Robinson being convicted of rape, despite being innocent.

The story of Lazarus, unique to the Gospel of John, and the Gospel reading for this last Sunday in Lent foreshadows events to come in the next weeks. Let's remember that there have been other 'signs' in John's Gospel. In Chapter 5, Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath who had been ill for 38 years, and John writes, “the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.”

Chapter 6, Jesus feeds the 5000. “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” And Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king and withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

And so now this final foreshadowing, the final sign of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is the raising of Lazarus to life that incites the plot for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. When Jesus tells his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea again”, they remind him that they were looking to stone him so why go back? There is a sense of imminent danger of what is to come.

It is tempting to let our focus be on the act of Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life. Lazarus' death provides the opportunity for Jesus to clearly confirm his closeness with his Father. It is the opportunity for Jesus to prepare his Disciples, to prepare his followers, to prepare Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and ultimately, to prepare US for Jesus' most significant declaration in this story –

I am the resurrection, and the life.

All those “signs”, all the foreshadowing that helps us understand what comes later, all those extraordinary events do prepare us for events to come, but this is the significant message in this Gospel.

I am the resurrection, and the life.

We tend to concentrate on the first part – **I am the resurrection** – because of Jesus' arrest, death, and resurrection as the ultimate proof that Jesus is the Son of God. And, that this focus is a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven.

It is the second part – **and the life** – that I believe is the Good News of the Gospel. It is NOT just “foreshadowing” our life after death; it is life right now, right here with Jesus. It is hope even in a seemingly hopeless, scary world. It is our relationships with Jesus and with one another that matter. There is possibility of life-giving love even in the face of disease, war, strife, and COVID-19.

The resurrection lends the image of Jesus as divine when we must not forget the power of the incarnation. The power of Jesus is in his humanity as well as his divinity. The most touching moment in the Lazarus story is when Jesus sees Mary crying and he begins crying with her. What a powerful example of Jesus' compassion as a human! He sees the sorrow of Mary and is overcome with emotions; he cries with her and the others grieving. And, he already knows Lazarus will live!

This is the sign for us. God who loves us and suffers with us in our suffering; He is deeply connected to us. Jesus is right here, holding us and acknowledging our pain and our fears. The image of God and Jesus holding my hand is so reassuring. I don't know about you, but this is exactly what I need right now. This comforts me, calms my fears, and makes me hopeful – not necessarily for what is to come, but for the life I am experiencing NOW, every day, and the connections with family, with you, with all in this world.