



March 6, 2005
Lent 4

John 11:45-53
The High Cost of Living
M. Craig Barnes

This is the fourth in our series of Lenten sermons on “Receiving Life.” Last week we examined the passage that immediately preceded today’s text, and witnessed Jesus miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead. But today we find that seeing is not necessarily believing.

Up to this point, the eleventh chapter of John has focused its attention on Jesus, the disciples, Mary and Martha, and then Lazarus. But throughout the chapter, John has consistently reminded us that a crowd of observers has been in the background. Now, after Lazarus has been called out of the tomb and raised from the dead, John draws his attention directly to the crowd:

“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and HAD SEEN WHAT JESUS DID, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priest [Caiaphas] and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” (11:45)

Now isn’t that interesting? Many saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and believed in him. But some people went to tell the religious hierarchy who were not impressed. What they were was afraid.

The raising of Lazarus thrusts everyone into a choice. There are only two options. Either you can believe in Jesus, or you can become afraid of Jesus. No one remains neutral, and no one wants to leave Jesus alone. Not any longer. Not after we realize that Jesus can change the way it is.

Death in the New Testament is a symbol for the way it is in a world without hope. If Jesus had simply comforted Lazarus’s sisters in their grief, no one would have thought twice. If he had even rushed to prevent Lazarus from dying, the crowd would have been impressed but not afraid. But a Savior who can defeat the power of death will either give you reasons for great hope or great alarm. It all depends on the deal you have made with how it is.

How it was, at this time, was not good for most Jews. The Roman armies were occupying their country. The burden of taxation was crippling. Freedom and liberties were restricted. Caesar could demand whatever he wanted. And he threatened to destroy them completely if they caused too much trouble. It was an oppressive way of life that had been around for a long time. However, the religious leaders had made a pretty good deal for themselves with the Romans. No one had made a better deal than Caiaphas, the high priest.

There were two political parties that competed for power on the Jewish council. On the right side of the aisle were the Pharisees, and on the left were the more liberal Sadducees. Rome determined which party would have ruling power by appointing the high priest. For eighteen years Caiaphas, a Sadducee, had kept that job which is a tribute to his political savvy. The Sadducees' political platform was somewhat optimistic, claiming, "The Romans aren't so bad. We've got good roads, building programs, and at least they keep other oppressors out." The Pharisees took a more pessimistic view. The Romans were Gentiles which meant they were sinners, but the only thing worse than a Gentile sinner, according to the Pharisees was a Jewish Rabbi who kept breaking the law by healing people on the Sabbath. So when Caiaphas got very worried that "everyone will believe" in Jesus, he found bilateral support on the ruling council. So, "from that day on they planned to put him to death."

That is what happens when we get good at coping with an oppressive world. We become afraid of the high cost of hope. The Sadducees were afraid the Romans would take away their power if Jesus started a popular movement. The Pharisees were afraid Jesus would take away their holiness by just giving the love of God to any sinner who needed it but didn't deserve it.

The Sadducees had worked hard for their power, and the Pharisees worked hard for their holiness. The power people were optimistic about the world, as they always are, because they're in control. The holy people were pessimistic, as they always are, because they think the world is a mess, but they each tell themselves, "At least I am okay." But real hope has nothing to do with our optimism or pessimism. An optimist thinks that this is the best of all possible worlds, and a pessimist is afraid that he is right. Both of them are focused on the options they can get out of this world, and neither one will find hope that way. Hope can only come when something — or someone — from another world breaks into this one. That has to be someone who can defeat the power of death and change the way it is.

Put yourself in Caiaphas' place. You've got something going for you in this oppressive world. I know I do. Maybe you have a good job, a few friends, a little money. Maybe you've even pulled together a little power. Do you really want a savior who prefers to raise life from the dead? No. You want a savior who keeps death at bay, and who makes a few improvements in the life you've got. That's what the Romans will do for you. But Jesus has little interest in the lousy deal you've made with the Romans. What Jesus wants to give you is a whole new life. He wants to give you a vision of a whole new world.

In his book *Hope Within History*, Walter Bruggemann claims, "Biblical hope reminds us that the way things are is precarious and in jeopardy. Hope reminds us not to absolutize the present, not to treat it too honorably, because it will not last." Biblical hope provides a place to stand outside the world, from which it is possible to evaluate, imagine, and seek redemption. Biblical hope dreams of another way — for all of us.

Again, after the raising of Lazarus, you have to decide if you want to live with Jesus' death-defying, revolutionary hope that can change the way it is for everyone. If Jesus can defeat death, he can undermine a society that is built on the assumption that you have to grab what you can

before you lose it all. But what a futile way to live: “Be a Sadducee — grab all of the power and wealth you can before you’re dead.” “Be a Pharisee — grab all of the respect, admiration, righteousness you can before you die.” In the end, what’s the difference? You’re still dead. Maybe your soul is even dead long before you die.

Jesus offers another way. Why not join Lazarus and begin a new life today? This is a life given by the Savior who calls you out of the tombs. It is a life that comes not as an achievement to be earned, but as a grace to be received. Why not reject the lousy deal of society that tempts to you use up life trying to gain what you cannot keep? Why not come to the Lord’s table today, taste of grace once again, experience what Calvin called “mystical union with Christ,” receive his eternal life in exchange for your futility, and start to use your remaining years for things that make a difference?

It is tragically ironic that the temple Caiaphas was so worried about keeping was eventually destroyed by the Romans anyway. In 70 AD the Roman General Titus leveled it, so that not one stone was standing upon another. That is what happens to all of the deals we make with an oppressive world. For a while you’ll get by with your own happiness. You can work hard and look like you are doing okay for many years. But in time the harsh world will still turn its destruction upon you. It doesn’t matter how healthy you are, how good your alarm system is, how much power or money you have collected. It is only a matter of time before all the things you are worried about keeping are gone. Death will see to that unless, like Lazarus, you have already died the life you planned to live and have opened your eyes to discover a savior who can at long last give you a life you’ll never lose. Amen.