

“What Do We Do, Now?”

Lent is difficult for many North American Christians, because it focuses not only on the undeniable reality of human alienation and brokenness, but also on our inability, in our own strength, to resolve that reality. That difficulty likely is multiplied this year because, regardless of denial and trivialization by some politicians and preachers, we're in a situation we didn't create, and we can't resolve. Some may feel helpless. Many are asking: “What do we do, now?”

All four Lectionary readings for today acknowledge our human inability to “solve” the problem of sin. Ezekiel surveys the valley of dry bones and envisions an unrepentant Israel, and asks, “What do we do now?” The Psalm addresses human brokenness, and the poet asks, “What do we do now to liberate those in the grip of their own self-destruction.” Paul contrasts life in the flesh and life in the spirit and asks, “What do we do now to move from flesh to spirit.”

What strikes me is that none of the texts answers that question, because these are situations beyond human ability to resolve.

I think Jesus had times like that; especially in his final week. Today and next Sunday we'll look at that last week—looking for how Jesus dealt with the anxiety produced by uncertain times. By looking at him, we can learn something about dealing with our own anxieties in these days of isolation and uncertainty.

Today's Gospel recounts the raising of Lazarus. The text is lengthy—the entire 11th chapter of John, but what gets my attention is not that story. I've read it before—several times. In fact, the worst sermon I ever preached was based on that story. What gets my attention is what happened after the raising of Lazarus.

In the 70s, “Values Clarification” was big. One exercise asked: “If you knew you had **one week** to live, how, and with whom, would you spend those last days?” Kind of a gruesome thought, huh?

I deal with death far too often: people with lingering disease, watching the sands drop through the hourglass. You can tell a lot about a person's character in those final days and hours. The make-up comes off, the masks are dropped; true character shines through the pain, the drugs, and the looming shadow of death.

Maybe that's why all four Gospels devote more time to Jesus' final week than to any other period in his life; as if THIS IS THE WEEK they want us to understand. As we move through that last week of Jesus' life, look for what's really important to Jesus. My premise is: “if it matters to Jesus, it should matter to us.”

Let's begin on Saturday.

Friday he'd been in Jericho; had lunch with Zacchaeus. On Friday he also healed a blind man, and he'd walked to Jerusalem—about sixteen miles over rough,

dangerous terrain. And he'd raised Lazarus, on Friday.

On Sunday we'll see him riding a donkey into Jerusalem in what the church now calls "The Triumphal Entry"; on Monday we'll see him cleanse the Temple; on Tuesday we'll find him encountering the Pharisees; on Wednesday, teaching his disciples, Thursday, making preparation and observing Passover with his disciples.

Every day something significant happened in that last week, and the four Gospels spare no detail. But what happened on Saturday? What did Jesus do, that last Sabbath of his life?

I know what I'd want to do! I'd not want to let that Saturday slip away! I'd be busy [what else?!!!] getting my ducks in a row: gathering important papers, explaining them to my family, giving final instructions and sage advice to my kids, making up for lost time—doing things I'd been meaning to do, needed to do . . .

So what did Jesus do? We look in Matthew: nothing's there about that final Sabbath. We look in Mark: nothing; Luke: nothing; and in John the only reference is late in the day, after the Sabbath was officially over. Jesus had supper with some friends in Bethany, late Saturday evening.

Nothing else is written about that last Saturday; but there's a lot written about what Jesus did every other Saturday of his life: he observed Sabbath. Let me put it in our language: *he took a day off*. On the eve of the most important week of his life, he took a day to rest his body and to restore his soul.

And out of the silence of this last Sabbath comes a message, loud and clear: *In each of our lives there are times when our world needs to stop. We need to schedule and keep a routine day off to rest our bodies and restore our souls.*

Is that easy for you to do? Not for me. I'd rather stay busy. My favorite verse *not* in the Bible is "Blessed are the busy!" There's something about being busy that just seems sacred.

Max Lucado tells about teaching his daughter to ride a bicycle. She was five or six, as I recall. Finally, the day came to graduate from training wheels to "big girl wheels." So, the two of them walked out to the street, where Max gave the standard lecture about looking both ways.

The street fell away down a hill; and standing there astride their bikes, Max asked, "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

She gulped and said, "I'm ready."

He said, "Now, remember, the most important thing about going downhill is to remember how to brake."

She said, "I remember." So Max rode about halfway down the hill and motioned her to follow. Here she came, faster and faster and faster, until her hands

were shaking on the handlebars and her eyes were as big as saucers. And she whizzed by, shouting, "I forgot how to stop peddling!"

She crashed. She was OK; but sometimes we're not. When we crash it's often in the form of migraines, ulcers, heart conditions, strokes... A whole new vocabulary in modern medicine talks about "Life-Style Diseases".

Do you remember how to stop peddling; to put the brakes to your anxious, roaring world?

The Sabbath was a beautiful tradition. A man was appointed to watch the late Friday skies, and when three stars appeared, he blew three blasts on the horn. The first alerted the farmers to come in from the fields; the second told the merchants to close their shops; and the third called mothers to light a candle and put it in the window [hence that beautiful Jewish phrase, "The Sabbath has begun to shine."] Work stopped, and the family gathered for the best meal of the week—the best food; best wine—and everyone got a good night's rest. And the next day was spent worshiping God, visiting with friends, just breathing.

Maybe the reason that sounds so beautiful to me is that my life—and in my observation, your life—isn't like that. We may take a day off—or two; but we've replaced rest with "Party!" Recreation. Play. Fun. But we work so hard at playing—rushing from birthday party to golf course to kids' ball game to another party. Our recreation has become as stressful as our work! Maybe that's why Mondays are so hard. We face Monday, unrested. No wonder the stress piles up so quickly.

On the other hand, there are some—and maybe by the time this pandemic has run its course it will be all of us—who are stressed precisely because of this down time. I'm hearing and reading words like, "cabin fever," "stir crazy."

One beautiful family in our church was experiencing just that. The kids were missing their friends at school; the walls were closing in; they were feeling claustrophobic. This family is very active in community theater—the whole family.

So, they got together and planned and wrote and produced a short video made up of songs and scenes from all the shows in which they had participated. Costumes. Dance routines. The whole nine yards. And they posted that video on Facebook. You could see the energy and sense the joy.

You see, the whole point of Sabbath is to break the cycle of whatever is exhausting your body and choking your soul. Change the routine. Be creative.

There's one more thing. A very important part of Sabbath was worship, and study, and prayer. Many years ago, I discovered the calming, enriching quality of contemplative prayer. Maybe, as your pastor, I've failed you by not teaching you that. It's not too late. Already we've held a Church Cabinet meeting and a Bible Study online. We can do that. I can teach you how to find that calm center in your

life—that place where you can go when the walls are closing in. I'll put that together.

By his example on his last Sabbath, Jesus established a First Principle of God's solution for "life-style diseases": he set aside regular, scheduled time to rest his body and to restore his soul.