

Questions for Breaking Open the Word groups are on page 12.

Questions for preparing this week's Scrutiny

1. In what ways have you, like the man born blind, failed to see?
2. In what ways have you, like the Pharisees, been resistant to letting go of past misunderstandings so that you can grow in your knowledge of the truth?
3. What can you do this week to prepare for your baptism?

Questions for other faith sharing groups

1. Have you ever felt hesitant to profess your beliefs because of the reaction you think you would receive from others? Explain.
2. Have you had to discard some of what you were taught as a child in order to grow spiritually? Explain.
3. Are you baptized? If so, do you think of yourself as chosen by God and as sent on mission? Explain.

Bible study questions

1. In what two ways does John invite his readers to think allegorically as they read his Gospel?
2. What steps does the man born blind go through as he recognizes Jesus' identity?
3. Why do the Pharisees think Jesus cannot be from God?
4. Why does Jesus accuse the Pharisees of remaining in their sin?
5. How does the author of the letter to the Ephesians encourage them to live?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

John 11:1-45 in its biblical context

In our commentaries on the Gospel readings for the last two Sundays we pointed out the literary devices that John uses to alert his audience to the fact that his story has more than one level of meaning. That knowledge will be very helpful in understanding the full message of the story of the raising of Lazarus. As we will see, this story is about more than the raising of Mary and Martha's brother to an extended life on earth. It is about the raising of John's audience, including us, to eternal life.

John makes it clear that to understand his story we must learn to think allegorically by once again having Jesus engage in a conversation in which words that are intended to be metaphorical are understood to be literal. Jesus tells his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." So the disciples said to him, 'Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.' But Jesus was talking about

his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep. So then Jesus said to them clearly, 'Lazarus has died.'

Notice that John explains the mistake to his audience ("But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep") and Jesus explains the mistake to the disciples ("Lazarus has died"). This interchange prepares us to think allegorically as we read the story.

John gives us another clue to look for hidden meaning by saying something that doesn't appear, on first reading, to make sense. After Jesus is told that Lazarus is ill John tells us, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was." We would expect Jesus to have exactly the opposite reaction. If Jesus loved Martha and Mary we would expect him to leave immediately to help them in their time of need. When an author says something incongruous at the literal level it is an invitation to look for a reason. In looking for the reason we are drawn to probe the very point that the author wants us to probe.

Both Martha and Mary express their disappointment to Jesus about his absence. When Martha first sees Jesus she says to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Mary first sees Jesus she also says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Remember that this is exactly what John's audience is saying. They had expected Jesus to return on the clouds of heaven before their time, the end of the first century AD. In addition, many of those who believe in Jesus' divinity are being expelled from the synagogue, therefore being exposed to Roman persecution, even martyrdom. John's audience, too, is saying, "Lord, if you had been here, our relatives would not have died." Through this story John is teaching his audience that Jesus is with them, and, in fact, their relatives have not died. They have been raised to eternal life.

We hear this truth being taught just after Martha confronts Jesus with his absence. Jesus tells Martha, "'Your brother will rise.' Martha said to him, 'I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus told her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'" These words are being addressed both to Martha in the story and to John's end-of-the-century audience. The risen Christ is asking John's contemporaries and us, "Do you believe this?"

Martha's response is the one that John wants his audience to give: "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." Martha is affirming the core theological truths that John has been teaching throughout his Gospel. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the one who came from the Father into the world, not to come and leave, but to stay. In fact, as John concludes his Gospel, he says that it is to teach these truths that he has written his Gospel in the first place:

"But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

As the story continues, John emphasizes Jesus' deep love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. When the story began, John told us that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." Now, as Jesus witnesses Mary's grief, John tells us that Jesus "became perturbed and deeply troubled. . . . And Jesus wept." The Jews, on seeing this, remark, "See how he loved him."

John also wants to emphasize that Jesus really does have power over life and death. In Mark's Gospel we read a story in which Jesus heals the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21-43). Jesus is told that the daughter has died, but it is not clear to the reader whether or not this information is correct. Here there is no doubt. Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Martha fears there will be a stench.

After the people remove the stone, an act of faith in itself, Jesus prays and then cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus does come out, "tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth." Jesus instructs the people to "Untie him and let him go."

Jesus had said immediately before performing this mighty sign, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" To see the glory of God is to see God's divinity. As the story ends, John tells us that "many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him." To believe in Jesus is to see Jesus' glory, to believe, with Martha, that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." John wants his audience, including us, to believe this so that we too may have eternal life.

Ezekiel 37:12-14 in its biblical context

Since we have just read the story of the raising of Lazarus it would be easy to conclude that the prophet Ezekiel was promising his audience, the exiles in Babylon, that God would bring them back from the dead. However, Ezekiel prophesied from 593 BC to 571 BC, well before the Israelites came to any kind of belief in life after death.

Rather, Ezekiel is assuring the people that God will be faithful to his covenant promise of land. Being in exile in Babylon was like being dead and buried. The people longed to return to the land of the living, to Israel. Ezekiel assures them that their hopes would be fulfilled: "Thus says the LORD God: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel."

Ezekiel's oracle is wonderful news for the people. Because they are in exile and have lost all they thought God had promised them—their land, their king, and their temple—they are having to rethink their understanding of their covenant relationship with God. Does God still love them? Are they still God's people? In this oracle God assures them that they are still God's people, as God says, "O my people." God has not forgotten God's covenant promises. The people will be

returned to their land. "I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the LORD. I have promised, and I will do it, says the LORD."

Ezekiel's prophecy was wonderful news for the exiles, but not as good as John's good news (the word *Gospel* means "good news") to his audience. Ezekiel was promising a return to Israel. John is promising eternal life.

Romans 8:8-11 in its biblical context

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, is teaching that through Jesus we have eternal life: "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you." This is the same truth that the story of the raising of Lazarus was teaching. Jesus has power over life and death. Those who believe in Jesus, who believe that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, will have life in him, eternal life.

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Questions for preparing for this week's Scrutiny

1. As a person who believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, how have you failed to live in fidelity to that belief?
2. As a person whom Christ loves, how have you failed to respond to that love?
3. What can you do this week to prepare for your baptism?

Questions for other faith sharing groups

1. Have you ever walked with someone to his or her death? Did you feel Christ's presence at that time? Explain.
2. Have you come to believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world"? Why do you believe this?
3. Do you believe that you belong to God? What ramifications does this belief have in your life?

Bible study questions

1. What words do both Martha and Mary say to Jesus?
2. Why are these words also on the lips of John's audience?
3. What is John teaching through the story of the raising of Lazarus?
4. Why were Ezekiel's words such good news for his audience?
5. What is Paul teaching the Romans in today's passage?