The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

March 9th, 2008

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Lazarus

The Rev. Betsy Payne Rosen

This past week at Kentfield hospital, where I work, was different only in its particulars. People moving in and out as they always do--some in wheelchairs, some on gurneys, a few walking in on their own. Admission documents filled out by anxious-looking family members, assisted by friendly if harried staff; discharge papers prepared and signed. In one bed, barely a step away from the noise and bustle of the main corridor (a rehab hospital is an active place), a forty-year-old woman lies dying from a brain tumor she's been fighting for eighteen months. We had hoped to give her a little bit more time. Her parents stand or sit at the foot of the bed; go in and out of the room from time to time, dry-eyed, prepared for what lies ahead by the months they've waited and hoped and stood vigil. The patient's fiancé--the agent for her health care Power of Attorney--nods politely to the nurse who checks the IV drip, then suddenly turns his back, wiping away tears. He has not quite crossed the final threshold of the decision he needs to make: Hospice care, or holding on like this for another week? This is not a quick process, this dying, and may take more long days ahead.

I am discreet, making myself useful, arranging for a Catholic priest to bring the Sacrament of the Sick. This is part of my job as chaplain, and this morning I do it easily and well, I hope. It costs me very little; I've been here before.

Maybe it's this surface ease, this easy professionalism, that leaves me vulnerable when I enter a second room, around the corner and down the hall. In a bed that had been empty the day before, a young man lies on his side, facing the door. As I walk towards him, smiling, and say my name, he half-lifts his hand and waves, his fingers waggling from a Velcro'd cast. I see that he is handsome, or was—like a handsomer Tom Hanks, with his crewcut and thick-lashed blue eyes--but not "right", in the head-injured way I recognize immediately from long experience: his eyes are slightly crossed, and there's a crust of dried saliva at the corners of his pursed lips that is gently but efficiently wiped away, for the thousandth time, by the dark-haired young woman--his wife--who lies snuggled up on the bed beside him, watching TV. The patient, Sam--I see it on the schedule above his bed-- is holding a yellow and orange teddy bear in his left arm. His wife, Ellie, turns off the television and begins to fill me in.

Her husband is 22 years old, a marine, survivor of an IED blast—an Improvised Explosive Device—that got him evacuated from Iraq on his third tour of duty in September, 2007.

I am used to young men like Sam; we get them on a regular basis, usually from car or work accidents, or risky sports. But here he is, our first Iraq casualty, and I feel my heart sink in my chest like a stone. I pull up a chair, to be level with him, and instruct my face to remain attentive, in sync with my mind, as Ellie tells the story she must have told them both, gamely, for the last seven months. Because Sam can understand us, she tells me; can answer yes and no questions fairly reliably, holding up first two fingers, then one. I learn that they were high school sweethearts; that they had had two weeks after they were married before he was deployed; that they'd fallen away from their religious habits, as people in their early twenties do, but

were “both believers, more than ever”. I listen to the story of how the doctors at Bethesda had warned her that first night not to expect Sam to live; how his father and his uncle had taken out a Bible and prayed for healing, and how she, a Catholic, had been “born again”, instantly, in that experience.

When she has finished, I ask a question or two myself, directed to Sam, then slip my hand into his. His grip, when I ask him to show me, is not great, but it’s there. Picturing the vital and utterly physical man he once was, seeing that strength in him still, I look him in the face and tell him with every ounce of faith that’s in me, *This is a good hospital. You will get better here.* I have said this before, many times, and meant it; I mean it now. Why does it take so much out of me this time? I stop after I leave the room and lean against the wall. I need a place to be alone. Finding an empty desk in the Physical Therapists’ office, I sit down. Outside the window, the early plum blossoms make a scrim that blurs the world beyond. I don’t try to think, to reflect, to judge my own reaction or their need. Within a few minutes, two of the young therapists come in, laughing, to write up their case notes, and I go back into the hallway.

Years ago, a nurse at another hospital told me of the time she’d spent in the cancer unit, caring for the very ill while at the same time hearing the cries of the newborn babies from the Birthing Center at the other end of the hall. Life and death—it’s such a cliché. Yet the age-old questions never change: why death here, and life there—or the other way around? An Indian holy man, a guru described in the book I’m reading as having achieved total enlightenment, living in a state of spiritual bliss, dies, painfully, of throat

cancer. Stephen Levine, in many people's eyes a modern saint, who in his books on healing into life and death has been my own teacher to a great degree, is prematurely frail and unable to teach or travel, while his wife and partner, Ondrea, is dying of leukemia. Yet my mother is going to be 95 this summer, and though she still gets pleasure from coming across a patch of nasturtiums, or walking outside at ten o'clock at night to see the full moon, she sighs and says, "I don't really know why I'm still here. People just live too long these days."

All of which brings us back to Jesus, and the raising of his friend, Lazarus, from the tomb. Was he brought back from death because Jesus loved him in particular? Possibly; who can know the power of human love? Jesus weeps real tears—a human function; salt like anybody else's. Or was he simply the recipient of Jesus' outreaching love for the whole world? In this case, we don't have to wonder, because, as in the story of the man born blind, Jesus makes it clear that the miracle--this turning upside down of what appear to be the laws of nature--is accomplished for neither of those reasons: neither out of personal favoritism (which would mean that if for some reason he had *not* chosen to bring Lazarus back, that would mean he *didn't* love him), nor simply an act of divine love—because if the latter, why doesn't he heal all the blind people in Israel, or raise all the dead? No, he says quite clearly that Lazarus' illness exists so that "the Son of God might be glorified through it." "Father, I thank you for having heard me," he says as the stone is rolled away from the tomb. "I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

And it works! “Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.” With their own eyes they had experienced something good and wonderful that they couldn’t account for, and looking towards Jesus, they understood him in a new way.

There is an enormous wealth of theology about the meaning of John’s gospel that I’m not going to touch. The raising of Lazarus is clearly a sign, a prefiguring of Jesus’ own death and resurrection, and for that reason alone calls for close attention. But at the same time, as with all the miracle stories in the New Testament, it seems to me, in some mysterious way, a—to each of us separately and to all of us together—to follow Jesus by actually trying to do what it is that he does. That’s exactly what he tells us to do, again and again! “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me”, he tells the disciples; “but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name.” (Jn. 14:12) That’s quite a promise, one we generally deal with by telling ourselves that he didn’t really mean it!.

I am well aware that for most of us, the mere concept of our having that sort of power, much less attempting to use it, makes us squirm—we are Episcopalians, after all. We have a horror of making any sort of grand, public claim of faith, or exhibiting what some of our nineteenth century forebears would have called “enthusiasm”—the idea that we might actually be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, that consuming fire. At the mere thought of such a thing, images of Elmer Gantry begin to project themselves onto our inner screens, or huge arenas in the Philippines, filled with gullible

people gasping as a “healer” reaches into a person’s chest cavity and pulls out what appears to be a dripping human heart. That’s not what Jesus’ healing miracles are about.

Without underestimating for a moment our own vast medical knowledge and spiritual sophistication, I ask you to take a moment, now, and consider whether it is possible that you, yourself, or the person sitting next to you, might already have experienced--or will experience at some point—the power to bring forth life from death: for another person, a marriage in trouble, a community needing to be reborn. Recall for a moment Jesus’ own experience in the story of the woman who is healed by reaching out to touch the hem of his garment. “Who touched me?” he stops and asks the baffled disciples, who are walking with him through a crowded street. *“I felt the power go out from me.”*

Often, when God works through us in the solemn miracle of bringing forth life from death, we will feel such a power go out from us. We may not recognize it; may be aware only that our head feels strange, or that our heart is beating faster, or hardly beating at all; that our face is flushed--or pale. We may feel an urgent need to leave the company of others and spend some time alone, in order to take in what has just happened. We won’t have a name for it, the first time, but if we open ourselves to the possibility that the same power that flowed through Jesus into Lazarus’ body may be available to us, we will recognize that we have, at times, been used for healing purposes—even, for a time, used up.

It might happen through a parent being willing to withstand the anger, even the apparent hatred, of a much-loved but angry teenager; willing to absorb the force of that anger into his or her own body, without ceasing to love. It might come through the shifting of a burden from one human soul to

another. If you have stepped forward, willingly, to take on a part of that burden, so that for the other person the weight of it mysteriously, even permanently disappears, you will have taken that burden into your body—though changed and lighter now, easier to carry. If we listen with an impartial heart, hour after hour, to the spirit-numbing quarrels of those around us, offering whatever inner spaciousness we can provide, so that some of that pain and yes, <u>even ill-will</u>, is carried away by us, leaving a sense of fresh hope and possibility that was not there before, we will feel it in our bodies. It will cost us something. That seems to be the law of it; if we decide to follow Christ, we will certainly suffer alongside the rest of God's creation, bearing each others' burdens.

What's the payoff? the doubter asks from the sidelines. *Why would you want to do this?* [Shrug.] The answer comes, for most of us, from what we have known, ourselves, of that same love freely given; that same price paid. So that whether we have felt God's saving grace directly from its source, or through the agency of another person, willing to pay the cost, we know what it is like to have been called forth by name, from the darkness of whatever tombs we've found ourselves in. Like Lazarus, we have come forth, blinking and stumbling, into the light of a new day. And we want to pass it on.