

Sermon for 3-29-20
Gospel -- John 11:1-45
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We're 7 days into a statewide stay-at-home order here in Ohio; which means -- among other things -- that many of us are discovering new and creative ways to keep ourselves entertained. One of the strategies at my house has been watching lots of superhero movies. I live with a couple of real superhero fanatics, and although I'm not quite as knowledgeable about all of the different superheroes and their backstories, I do have my opinions...

My favorite superhero is Captain America. This is partially because of his "Greatest Generation" patriotism, and also partially because the actor who plays him is so handsome -- I'm only human! But it's mostly because of the kind of superhero he is.

There's a scene early in the first Captain America movie that illustrates everything I love about this character. He's not a superhero yet, he's just a regular guy named Steve Rogers, a skinny army recruit struggling his way through basic training. In this scene, one of the commanding officers throws out a dummy grenade that all the recruits think is live. They immediately scatter -- every man for himself! -- except for Steve Rogers, who throws himself onto the grenade and screams for everyone else to get back.

Once the dust clears and everyone realizes the grenade is a dud, the other guys laugh at him for looking foolish... but the point is clear. Steve Rogers isn't like the others. Although he's not the biggest or the strongest (yet), he's certainly the bravest. And it's not the loud, macho, chest-thumping bravery we see so often in the movies, and in real life -- it's true heroism, the courage to sacrifice one's own life for others. That's why he's my favorite superhero.

Now you may be wondering: what on earth does Captain America have to do with the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? It's a fair question!

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, it's a turning point in John's Gospel. Not only does it demonstrate his power, and show that he is without a doubt the Son

of God... it also illustrates his highest values, the holy ideals that he lives, and will die, by.

It's like that grenade scene in Captain America, times 1000.

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This is a long Gospel reading -- 45 verses! -- but we cannot fully understand this story without considering what came just before it and what is to come just after it.

In chapter 10 of John's Gospel, just before the death and resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus explains who and what he is through a heartfelt metaphor:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd... And I lay down my life for the sheep."ⁱ

This loving, gentle, self-sacrificing Good Shepherd is, perhaps not surprisingly, deeply unpopular with the people who want things to stay just the way they are. This version of power and authority and leadership does not square with the existing system that relies on wealth and physical force for control. Jesus presents an alternative model, another way of being, a different -- and holy -- source of Truth; and the people who like the current way just fine don't want to hear it. So they try to stone him, and he very narrowly escapes into the countryside.ⁱⁱ

But then, at the beginning of today's Gospel reading, he receives word from his friends Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus is ill.ⁱⁱⁱ When Jesus tells his disciples that it's time to travel back to Judea to see Lazarus, their response is, "Um, are you kidding? You were almost killed there like 5 minutes ago!"^{iv} {My paraphrase, of course.}

It's far too dangerous, what Jesus is proposing; it's too great a risk. But you and I know what the disciples are discovering: that self-preservation is not part of his decision-making process. Jesus is about seeking and serving the lost, binding up

the brokenhearted, and bringing new life to those who live in the midst of Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones; and he will risk his life, and lose his life, for their benefit -- for our benefit.

So they go to Bethany, and Jesus meets Mary and Martha, and hears the story of their brother's death. He stands with them, in the fullness of their grief, and he weeps with them.^v Lazarus has been dead and sealed up in his tomb for 4 days, and it seems all hope is lost... but Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.^{vi} Jesus is eternal hope, and eternal life. And Jesus calls to Lazarus: "come out!" And the dead man, now restored to life, walks out of his tomb into the bright light of day.

This is the greatest of many great miracles Jesus has performed; it's also the one that seals his fate. Today's reading ends with the statement that many of the people who witnessed the raising of Lazarus began to follow Jesus as a result. But the next few verses are important, too: some of those witnesses go straight to the Pharisees, and they call a meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss the matter.

"What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy... our nation."^{vii}

Jesus is attracting too much attention; he's getting the people worked up, and he's a threat to the religious powers that be and the understanding they have with the Romans.

Enter Caiaphas. We know his name. Caiaphas is the high priest, head of the Sanhedrin and one who will eventually question Jesus and send him to Pontius Pilate for condemnation.

Caiaphas, very practical and level-headed, says to the rest of the council: "[I]t is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."^{viii}

So from that day on they planned to put him to death.^{ix}

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Yesterday at 11 am, I checked the World Health Organization's COVID-19 global Situation Dashboard. It listed 23,495 confirmed deaths due to the novel coronavirus.^x

One of those deaths was an Italian Catholic priest, Father Giuseppe Berardelli, who served in a small village just outside Milan. He was 72. Father Giuseppe died back on March 15th. There was no funeral mass for him; funerals are prohibited in Italy right now. But local journalists report that when Father Giuseppe's casket rolled through the streets of his village, the residents opened their windows and went out on their balconies and applauded him.

You see, when Father Giuseppe became ill, his parishioners banded together to buy a ventilator for him. The hospitals in Milan don't have nearly enough ventilators available for everyone who needs one. But when it came time to use the ventilator, Father Giuseppe refused. He asked his doctors to use it on another patient, a young man he had never met.^{xi}

So the doctors did as the priest asked; and then he died.

Maybe we don't need superheroes like Captain America, when we have real heroes, like Giuseppe Berardelli.

These are the kinds of Christians we are called to be. Not me-first, us-first, toilet-paper-hoarding, watch-out-for-number-one, do-what-we-want-regardless-of-the-effects-on-others Christians. That is the way of Caiaphas, the way of those who are always ready to sacrifice someone else's comfort, or someone else's life, to protect themselves.

In times of great trial and suffering and turmoil, Jesus calls us to a different way. It's the way of self-sacrifice, not other-sacrifice. It's the way of unbridled compassion and foolish generosity and irrational love of neighbor. It's the Way of the Cross, and the Way of Resurrection. It is, as our Presiding Bishop says, the Way of Love.

May we walk it together. **Amen.**

ⁱ John 10:11-15 NRSV

ⁱⁱ 10:39-42

ⁱⁱⁱ 11:3

^{iv} 11:8

^v 11:35

^{vi} 11:25

^{vii} 11:47-48

^{viii} 11:50

^{ix} 11:53

^x <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

^{xi} <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/24/covid-19-italian-priest-who-donated-his-ventilator-has-reportedly-died/2906351001/>