

By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is Vice President of the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions.

Questions and Answers from Lazarus

I have been reading about Lazarus this week. My *Guide to Prayer** sections the raising of Lazarus into four days. In this season of equinox, starting the week with snow, the daylight ending earlier, and the weather getting colder; beginning the first four days of the week with sickness, death, and dying was difficult. But this morning I began to look at this differently. This morning I looked at the story again, and I had some questions, and I saw Hope.



In Verse One we learn that Lazarus is ill and that he is the brother of Martha and Mary. In Verse Two we learn that Mary is the one who anoints Jesus “with perfume and wipes his feet with her hair.” (11:2). Now this is something that doesn’t happen in John’s Gospel until *after* this chapter. I kept thinking “if John’s Gospel was the only one you ever read the question would hang in the air until you read Chapter 12 - then you might say “Ah-hah!” But what would your epiphany really be? So my question is: Why does John mention this before it happens?

Also, why am I reading about Lazarus in November, when I would think this would be an *Easter* passage, because it leads into Jesus’ *own* Passion narratives? I’ll admit I had to consult my Commentary** for help. I am reflecting on this here because you may ask these same questions. What purpose does the story of Lazarus’ raising serve on the *advent* of Advent?

Consulting the Commentary actually caused me to think about the seasons of the Christian Year. We are coming upon the *end* of the Christian Year. Unlike our *Calendar* Year, which begins January 1st, our *Christian* Calendar begins with the first Sunday in Advent, which *this* year is November 29. But we celebrate the *end* of the Christian Year the Sunday before, November 22, as Christ the King Sunday. This wraps up the Christian Year nicely, beginning with looking

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forward to the coming of the Christ in the birth of Jesus, and ending with him declaring victory over death - or Christ as King.

And so in Advent we prepare not only for the coming of the Christ Child, but we also anticipate the day described in John's Revelation when the New Jerusalem will descend, and "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples...God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, the first things have passed away and the one who is seated *on the throne* will say, 'See, I am making all things new.'" (Rev. 21:1-5) And so we look forward to the season where we anticipate the coming of Emmanuel - God with us.

With that in mind, it makes sense to me that my readings for this month would be pivotal in preparing us to celebrate Christ as King; which cannot happen without also revisiting these passages leading up to his anointing, death, and resurrection.

The story of Lazarus is particularly relevant because it prepares the reader for Jesus own death and resurrection. The second verse about Mary being *the one who anointed Jesus* anticipates the parallel between this report of Lazarus dead *four* days in the tomb and raised from the dead, and Jesus dead *three* days and raised. It also underscores that some Jews *did* believe in Jesus and began to follow, which is what caused the religious leaders who benefitted from things remaining as they are, to fear that the Temple and their own way of life was in jeopardy if they let Jesus' continue. Jesus' ability to not only perform miracles, and heal but now his evident power and authority over both the living and the dead made a mockery of their claims about him being an imposter. By the end of Chapter 11 we see these leaders consulting with one another to determine a solution. Finally Caiaphas, the high priest that year, says to them: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:50). And, so from that point on, they plot to kill Lazarus - walking proof of Jesus power - in addition to Jesus himself.

Soon we will enter a New Year and Advent, a time of waiting for the coming Messiah, the birth of a child that will grow up as the Christ, and through his life will live the love of God, that we might live it too! There's hope in that!

As we enter this season of thanks giving and the end of the Christian Year, may we pray for a kinder, gentler America - one where Jesus himself would be safe to dwell. Amen

*Reuben P. Job & Norman Shawchuck, A Guide to Prayer for All God's People, The Upper Room, Nashville, TN, 1990, p. 325.

**The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, Luke & John, Abington Press, Nashville, TN, 1995, p. 685

Image: *The raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt)*, by Vincent van Gogh.

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