

“What a difference a Comma Makes”
John 11:1-45
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The Lectionary passages from John this month are so long and so rich that it is almost inevitable that something important will need to be left untouched so that we all might get to bed at a reasonable hour. Such was the case last week with respect to the story of the man born blind for whom Jesus restored both his sight and his vision. What I also would have liked to have spent some time on last Sunday was the curious statement Jesus makes near the beginning of that story, a statement which is enough like the one Jesus makes in tonight’s story to make it worth revisiting. In John chapter 9, in response to a question from his disciples about who is the culprit whose sin was responsible for causing the blindness of the man they have encountered, Jesus says, “Neither this man, nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” Listen again to the similar statement Jesus makes in tonight’s story from John 11: “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” In both of these stories, we hear Jesus making the claim that the purpose of the blindness of one man, and the fatal illness of another, is that God may be revealed and glorified. Martha and Mary, both of whom say, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” are not

the only people to recognize a certain cosmic injustice in Jesus' statements; for the sake of God's honor and glory, humans are left to suffer, in one man's case, decades, and in the other, four days in the tomb on top of his time in bed preceding his death. Now, perhaps the idea that the suffering of these men was created by God for the moment in which Jesus makes use of it to make a point about himself being the light of the world, is troubling to you. It has troubled many people, not least of whom are those who suffer from various illnesses or disabilities. Are we to believe that for the sake of a teachable moment for Jesus' disciples or even for the world, that one of God's children was forced to bear a burden of God's own placing? Don't get me wrong. I'm the first person to want to protect God's mystery and God's inscrutability; God can do whatever God so chooses and you'll get no argument from me. But even in the context of the kind of narration of the story in the Gospel of John which lends itself to mystery, I wonder if our understanding of what Jesus is saying has missed the mark. Maybe, just maybe, the revealing of God's glory isn't because of one man's blindness or another man's death, but in spite of them. And ironically, ironically, for an idea as vast as the relationship of suffering to the divine purpose, it may all come down to the punctuation. Oh, what a difference a comma makes.

In the Greek texts that have been handed down to us, those from which we have made our English translations, there is no punctuation; no periods, no semicolons, no capital letters, nothing to tell us where a verse begins or ends.

Sometimes it is easy to see where there is a division, like when the story shifts to new characters or a new location, but other times our translators must simply do their best and make judgment calls. Last Sunday's passage from John contains one of those judgment calls, one which has caused, it is fair to say, a great deal of consternation and concern, but also one which could be translated quite differently and helpfully. I have already referred to verse three, in which we are told, according to the translation I use, that: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned (semi-colon) he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed through him."

And so here is where we rearrange the missing punctuation marks. You see, in the Greek text of this passage there is a word which is commonly translated as "but," but it is a word which has been glossed over in the English-language renderings of the passage. Taking into consideration that word, and rearranging the punctuation, you arrive at something like this: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned (period). He *was* born blind, *but so that* God's works might be revealed in him (comma, not period) we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day (semi-colon) night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." It is a big difference to be sure, from God being responsible for the blindness, to God responding to it. You see, if we would want to assign the man's blindness to God's foresight, we should also be prepared to do the same for the woman we met two weeks ago, the woman at the well, and say

that God planned it so that she would have not one but five husbands, all so that she could recognize Jesus when he makes known that he knows this fact. We would need to do the same to the story we hear this week about the death of Lazarus, and say that God foreordained him to a premature death so that Jesus can demonstrate that he is “the resurrection and the life.” Even in the mystery language of John, it seems to me far more likely that God redeems the quite everyday suffering of these people through their chance encounters with Jesus rather than that these encounters are the resolution to their God-caused suffering. Either way, God’s glory is revealed, and those who once experienced only life, now experience it abundantly. What we can leave behind with such a translation is that stumbling block of a divinely caused condition when no such thing is necessary for the revelation of the glory of God.

Having said that, the Bible is filled with stumbling block stories of Jesus. His whole life was a stumbling block to many. He didn’t come here to be easy for us. We are not called to make him like us, but to make ourselves like him. We should be suspicious of a Jesus, or a God, who looks and acts a little too much like us, or who makes us feel too comfortable with ourselves. A God who causes suffering so that the divine glory may later be revealed is certainly not a comfortable notion, and so it is not on *that* basis that I am suggesting we think differently about this translation. Rather, I think it inconsistent with the overall witness of Scripture to assign the suffering to God’s intentions. I think it

inconsistent with the thrust of the message in John, that Jesus, the light of the world, has come. The man's blindness belongs to darkness, literally and metaphorically. It is Christ, the light of the world, which makes seeing possible, literally and metaphorically, for the man in the story. To suggest that God caused the man's blindness is to suggest that God is simultaneously in the darkness business, when there is no evidence for that to be found. If Jesus reveals God in the most authentic possible way, do we see Jesus causing suffering, or healing it? Does he bring life, or death?

Which brings us to tonight's passage, in which Jesus does not go quite so far as to attribute to God the death of Lazarus, which in itself helps make the case for rearranging the commas in the previous story. More plainly in the Lazarus story, the illness, unlike the man's blindness, simply exists without hint of divine cause. Lazarus has been sick, and his sisters have called to their friend Jesus to come and do what he is known for doing, namely to heal him. Perhaps they have heard about what happened with the blind man or had witnessed other signs of the presence of the Kingdom. Their faith is not misplaced when they each tell him that had he arrived in time, their brother would not have died. But they did not know what Jesus knew. Understandably, they were more concerned about preserving the life of their brother than trying to bring him back from the dead. It probably never even occurred to them to ask such a thing of Jesus. Live was live. Dead was dead. They knew about the resurrection of the dead, but for them it was a faraway event

in the future, “on the last day.” And in the midst of their trauma, we should not be surprised that they were not thinking about life and death in the same category as Jesus, for whom the words had a far different meaning. Like so many characters in the Gospels, and especially Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and all the Jewish leaders in the Gospel of John, Martha and Mary stumble on the literal meanings of words and events and almost lose out on their real significance. They almost lose out on catching a glimpse of the Kingdom

“This illness does not lead to death” Jesus says to his disciples, and he is right because in God’s eyes, death is another matter entirely, having nothing to do with bodies, diseases, and lifespans, and everything to do with grace, love, and relationships. At one level, you can read Jesus’ declaration as a prognostication, maybe even a prophecy, that Lazarus’ current condition will not be permanent. Jesus knows that he will raise Lazarus and so is able to say that this is not the end of the line for his beloved friend. Yet, we know that the illness did lead to death, even if it wasn’t permanent, and that in the end, Lazarus, like all the rest of us, will die once (or in his case, twice) and for all. No one escapes that kind of death.

But of course, Jesus is not talking about that kind of death. He is speaking about living death, about the lives we sometimes lead walking around like the zombies we see in the movies, zombies whose limbs have movement, whose lungs fill with air, whose voice still produce sounds, but who have nothing which resembles life. They are the living dead, a condition far worse than simply being

dead. They are missing the opportunity to experience life while alive, a life in communion with the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and all the saints. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“*This* illness does not lead to death,” indeed.

In chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, the chapter conveniently skipped during this Lenten season, is a verse which gets to the very heart of what Jesus asks Martha to believe. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” it says in verse 10, a statement which is like a preview of tonight’s passage in which Jesus makes very clear that believing in him is not just about eternal life, but also about abundant life. It is about avoiding becoming a zombie, one of the living dead. It is about experiencing during our handful of years the fullness of the wonder of God’s creation and God’s gifts to us of family and friends, meaningful work, love, compassion, mercy, and grace. It may be precisely against believing only in eternal life that Jesus does not rush to save Lazarus from death, for in raising him, Jesus demonstrates something about the fact that there is a deeper life to be lived, that even though Lazarus will die again, he still has a chance to really live. “This illness does not lead to death.” Indeed, it led to life, for Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and even some of the “Jews.” Will it lead to life for you?

There are moments in each of our lives when we forget that we are alive, when we are so overwhelmed by our responsibilities, our fears, our failures, or

even our possibilities, that we might be mistaken for zombies, zombies that are sure they have eternal life, but not so sure they have abundant life. It is in those moments that we live as if there were a period, a full stop, somewhere in the midst the unpunctuated sentence that is our life, rather than a comma, or a semi-colon, a dash, or even a question mark. Like those judgment calls in the translation of Scripture, perhaps we need to rearrange the punctuation to more accurately reflect the grace and glory of God. “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” It is the living of our abundant life that glorifies God, not our waiting for eternal life.

Although the actual raising of Lazarus is somewhat anti-climactic, it does give us the chance to reflect on the fact that even when we feel like the living dead, God is still the God of both the living and the dead. Remember that it is Martha who makes the confession Jesus is looking for when she says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world,” the affirmation that suggests she understands what life and death are really all about. But it is the same Martha who also says, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” a protest that shows that maybe she doesn’t live that understanding as fully as she could. We have no reason to believe that Martha was condemned for being a momentary zombie, and we have no reason to think we will be either. It would be nice to believe that we always live life abundantly from the moment in which we recognize it, but the truth is that most of us are like Lazarus,

who both lived and died not just once and for all, but twice and for all. We may need to hear the call more than once to respond. We may need friends to tell it to us, or pray it to us again in our most difficult moments. We may need to shout it out ourselves if we are to be the voice of Jesus Christ. “Lazarus, come out!” Jesus says, not only to the dead man, but to his sisters, their mourning friends, you, and I, and all that God has created. “Come out, all of you, and live and rejoice, for God has loved you enough to make life truly possible, not only forever, but for today.” May God help us to truly live. Amen.