

It is such a great Gospel for All Saints Sunday, isn't it? It reminds us of where we got the idea for all those spooky costumes and people coming back from the dead images we symbolized Friday night during our Eve of All Hallows party. The raising of Lazarus has created an entire genre of entertainment at this time of year, though most people celebrating Halloween have no idea why they are doing what they do, and that Halloween is the Eve of the real feast day, today, All Hallows Day.

But when we get beyond how this story has led to the creepy fun of Halloween, I must admit to you that as a Gospel, as a story of what is supposed to be Good News, I have always found it profoundly disturbing. At first blush, the tale of a young man coming back to life and the intense joy that must have been experienced by his sisters, sounds like the greatest news ever. But for all of us hearing it who are in the midst of watching our own loved one approach death, the story can sound almost cruel. For those who have recently lost a loved one to death, the main emotion that this Gospel often fosters is a deep abiding anger.

Whenever I hear this Gospel, I cannot help but recall the reaction of little seven year old Nicolle Davenport many years ago, when she heard it for the first time. She immediately became furious and yelled and screamed. "That story is not true! It can't be true! If it was true, than God would have brought my parents back to life!" You see, Nicolle's parents had both been killed in a car accident the year before.

Of course, that natural reaction is not limited to children. The miracle stories,

especially this miracle story, cannot help but create resentment in each of us when we must face death square in the face. Even Jesus responds this way in today's Gospel, full of anger over the death of his friend. "How can God do this to us?", Jesus and each of us want to know. After hearing today's Gospel, we are left with two possible responses. The first is Nicolle's, the self defense reaction. "This can't be true, because if it was, God would save our brother, mother, husband too." If we can avoid this critical only reading of today's Gospel, then we are left accepting the miracle, which can only lead us to want one of our own. "If God did it for Martha and Mary, then why not for me?"

So we read the story over and over again, looking for the secret pass code. Certainly if we follow the right series of actions, God will step in and bring our loved one back from the grave. If we combine the correct combination of petitionary prayer, service to others and faith, then we too, will unlock the code.

What recipe do the characters in today's story follow? Lazarus, of course, does not follow any action. He doesn't ask for this at all. Martha and Mary, at least at first, do not either. The message they send to Jesus says no more than this, "he whom you love is ill." Does this mean that we are not to ask directly for a miracle if we are to get one? Well, maybe not, because in the sentence before today's Gospel officially begins, Martha ever so gently hints at asking Jesus for help, sounding a bit like Jesus's mother in the story of the wedding at Cana. "But even now," she says, "I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

What about all those other miracle stories? Last week, we heard the tale of

Bartimaeus, the blind man. You may recall that he asks Jesus very directly to give him sight. Other cures take place throughout the Gospels with the person, like Lazarus, never asking for a blessed thing. A few weeks ago, we had the woman who had been bleeding for years and was cured not by asking Jesus but by touching his garment. But then in the same Gospel, we have Jairus who actually begs and pleads for his daughter's life.

The point is, there is no pass code. There is no magic formula to follow to get our own miracle. How can this be? Why does God's system appear to be utterly arbitrary? Why is it that sometimes people with faith do experience a miracle, whereas other times people who have no connection at all to God seem to cash in? How can it be that people who pray all the time and people who pray only once can both be uniquely chosen to suddenly go into remission or seemingly come back from the dead? And why is it that so many wonderful, caring, faithful people never seem to get a miracle?

Perhaps the worst theology ever espoused to explain this disturbing part of today's Gospel is the notion that this really is all about faith. I have unfortunately had the horrible experience of hearing people tell a grieving spouse that if their belief in God had just been a little stronger, their husband or wife would not be in that hospital bed. Suggesting such a thing to someone who is in the midst of loss and anguish is often more debilitating than the loss itself. It is cruel and unusual punishment and it is also biblically unfounded.

So why did God create such a random system? None of us can pretend to

understand the rationale behind God's actions, but my guess is that this has something to do with helping humanity in understanding ourselves. If there was a recipe for creating a miracle and making it happen in our lives, imagine how we might respond to that. We follow the formula and magic happens. We might think that we are actually making this happen. We might begin to believe that we are somehow in control of our own lives. Perhaps that is God's point. We are not in control. God is. Whenever we start to think that it is our actions or belief system that can make miracles, God reminds us that not only do we not control the system, but we still don't understand the system. If we think that if we believe hard enough, we can save our wife from dying, we are not practicing faith but instead a form of voodoo.

Does this mean that since we are not in control, all of us should stop praying for miracles? I hope not. Because I believe the power of today's Gospel is revealed in what we learn about God today. How does Jesus respond to the grief experienced by those surrounding him today? He was, as the NRSV translation puts it, "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved"...and then...then he too started crying.

This is the God of our faith, the God experienced by our communion of saints, the God of Christian life. Perhaps we do not know how and why miracles occur. Perhaps we do not understand why God chooses to raise one and not the other. But what we do know is that our God weeps with us in our pain. Our God hears our prayers and responds, perhaps not in a miracle, but always with the deepest compassion and concern. We must pray because God does hear those prayers. And when we cry out in pain to God, we know that God cries right along with us. That is the power of today's

Gospel for me. God feels. God feels with us.

Let us also remember that in the Gospel of John, it is this event in Jesus' life that will seal his fate. Because Jesus turns around and goes back into Judea to save his friend and because this act threatens the power structure of the Roman empire, Jesus will be killed. He knows that of course when he heads back. He knows it when he raises Lazarus. But he does it anyway. That too, is the reason we pray. Not only does our God cry with us, but our God cares for us so much that God sacrifices God's very essence to take care of you and me.

Miracles are wonderful, as they give us a tiny glimpse of the kingdom of God, a quick unveiling of what it will be like when the kingdom is all around us. But they are not a panacea. We need to remember that they are only a quick vision of what can be. After today's miracle, Lazarus will go on to die again, this time for good. The real Good News in today's Gospel is the risk that Jesus takes to protect his friend. The real Good News is the knowledge we gain of a God who cries with us when we suffer.

There is also one more critical unveiling in today's story. The details are meant to take us beyond the miracle, beyond the temporary glimpse of the kingdom offered in the resuscitation of Lazarus. On the other side of the literal details, we are led past the temporary vision of the kingdom, to something much more permanent. That rock in front of Lazarus' tomb, and the time period elapsed since Lazarus' death are supposed to remind us of what all of us know is coming. They are a precursor of what will happen with the risen Christ. The difference is when that happens, it will not be a resuscitation of a body that will live to die again. Instead, it will be a resurrection. What today's

Gospel points us toward is something far more than a miracle. Instead of a flash of the kingdom, it is the kingdom. What the story of the raising of Lazarus points us toward is a permanent miracle, and that is the miracle all of us have the opportunity to experience.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not doing the standard preacher cop-out, telling you that eventually we will all experience the kingdom after our death. Of course we will all discover the permanent kingdom through the power of our own resurrection. But I think there is something else going on here, something about our lives in the here and now and a taste of the kingdom that Jesus is offering us today, without experiencing a so called miracle.

That gift of the kingdom comes to us through resurrection all right, but not just our own. Resurrection also happens for us through the resurrection of others. The answer to Nicolle's burning question today is the one that Jesus offers Martha. God does not resuscitate all of our loved ones who have died. But they most certainly are resurrected. And it is through their resurrection that each of us also has the opportunity to experiences the kingdom of God right here on earth.

If there was ever a concrete example of this, it is this community where you sit right now. We have had our fair share of catastrophes through the untimely deaths of so many of the people who called St. David's home. The founder of our parish and the first doctor in Page, Ivan Kazan, was taken from us in a plane accident. His son, who would become a priest at St. David's, along with his daughter in law, were killed in a car crash on the way back from Diocesan Convention. The Bishop of Nevada, Wesley

Frensdorff, was killed in a plane crash, coming back from visiting St. David's. Our food pantry and office building is named after Paul and Norma Aiken, who died just as this parish was finally beginning to become what they always dreamed about it being. Our fellowship hall is named after Glenn Gossard, also taken from Judy and Adrienne and Catlin and the rest of us in the prime of his life and our lives. The aforementioned Nicolle Davenport not only lost her parents, but her grandfather and so many other members of her family, including her cousin just last year.

In none of these cases did God supply a miracle and resuscitate any of these folk so they could be with us today. Glenn went into remission and that was a miracle, but he too died way too young and way before he had the opportunity to experience the beautiful people his daughters have become. But each and every one of them was resurrected. All of them are united with God, and in a special way, with us. They are our saints and they connect us with the divine. If it had not been for their resurrection, there is no way that St. David's could have risen from the ashes and become a new vision of the kingdom.

From our diverse denominational backgrounds, many of us struggle with the whole notion of saints. But this is what saints are really all about. It is through them that we get to experience a piece of the kingdom of God right here on earth. It is through our relatives and friends, the people who built this church, as well as that entire list of people going all the way back to Jesus that we commemorate each week in our services, that allow us to experience resurrection here on earth. It is through them that St. David's was resurrected and has become such an important place for each of us to

experience God in our lives. That is what we mean when we say the communion of saints.

Forget the ridiculous notion that saints are people who have three miracles attributed to them. That's magic again. That's making believe that we are in control, that any of us can bring about miracles through our own faith. Just like today's Gospel, saints are not about resuscitation, but rather resurrection. They bring us to the kingdom and they show us how to get there while we are still here on earth.

Today then, let us celebrate our saints. Let us celebrate those who continue to connect us to God every day, whose legacy we stand upon, the ones who have taken us beyond the temporary vision of the kingdom offered to us through miracles, to a more lasting one, a one not of resuscitation, but resurrection. Amen.