

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Cynthia and I were visiting our son a few years ago in southern California, and we spent a day at Universal Studios with the family. Of course we had a lot of fun watching as our grandson and granddaughter met and posed with Dora the Explorer, Sponge Bob, Frankenstein and other cartoon and movie celebrities. I certainly enjoyed the rides, especially the rollercoaster. Something else I enjoyed is the way studios set the scene for some of their effects. The right scene adds to the enjoyment and appreciation I have for watching a movie.

Now, I have noticed as I have read scripture and devotions over the years how often the scene is set, how careful the writers of the books of the Bible were to give some background to aid in our understanding of the essential points. Setting the stage, for me is essential in getting a feel for what God wants to convey to us who live so many years later, in a place and culture so incredibly different from both OT and NT times. I also have come to really appreciate looking into the background of the society of Jesus' day, understanding Roman and Jewish customs.

So how about we do a little stage setting of our own? Jesus gave sight to the blind man on the Sabbath day, putting mud on his eyes and telling him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man was physically blind, but Jesus restores his sight, but even more importantly the man receives spiritual sight as well. He is able to see with his eyes, and with his heart as he acknowledges Jesus as Lord.

Now Jesus bides his time, he tarries for a while. He's intending to go to Bethany, but by choosing his time to go there, Jesus is choosing the time of his own death. There is intentionality to Jesus' timing, just as there was when he gave sight to the blind man on the Sabbath. One more day probably would not have mattered much to the blind man, but Jesus was very intentional about giving sight, that God might be glorified on that day. Now he is setting the stage for what is to come.

He announces to the disciples that he is going to Bethany and Thomas tells the others that they might as well go with Jesus, so that they might die with him. Thomas is talking about the possibility of being stoned to death, and it is a very real concern to him and to the rest of the disciples. You and I do not have that particular concern, but nonetheless we also are called to die with Jesus, and we do so every day, though our baptism.

Four days have now passed from the time the messenger arrived telling Jesus that Lazarus was ill, figure one day for the messenger to get to Jesus, two days of tarrying, and another day as they journey. Now in those days, a person was buried the same day he or she died. There was no embalming process, so upon death, burial, in a tomb or in the ground, happened in short order. Now it was also thought by many two thousand years ago, that the soul would tarry near the body for up to three days so at this point those who were mourning Lazarus would have considered him really dead since it's been four days since his death.

Now in Bethany, Jesus has been standing in front of Lazarus' tomb, very moved. The Son of God weeps seeing the grief of Mary and Martha and their friends. He knows that the root cause of death, of separation from God, is sin. He knows that he himself is going to be glorified in the coming days as he is crucified and then rises on the third day. Jesus weeps and tells them to move the stone. Lazarus has been laid in his tomb and Martha, the practical sister, tells Jesus that there will be an odor because he has been dead four days.

Jesus reminds her that he had said if she believed she would see the glory of God. He looks upward and prays, thanking God for having heard him as God always hears him, saying it for the sake of the crowd that the onlookers might believe that Jesus is sent by God. He cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus obeys. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead because even death will not separate believers from God! Lazarus could do nothing for himself, he was dead after all, but the power of God gives him new life. Lazarus is unbound and set free.

And now the stage is set! Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, you also, brothers and sisters, are unbound, set free by Christ in the waters of your baptisms, in eating and drinking the Lord's Supper. Set free from sin and death, not by what you have done, not by what you will do, but by what Jesus has done for each of you. Set free to assume the yoke of Christ, which Jesus tells us is a light burden. Set free to live lives that reflect what you are, that reflect whose you are. You are Jesus' own and he has called you each by name. You have been given faith by the grace of God and because of that you are free to serve, not in drudgery, not because you are required to do so, but because God has set you free to serve him in serving others, as those who have gone before us have done.

What you will find, what many of us have found is that even after we have been "loosed" or "unbound," we still keep ourselves wrapped up and bound in our grave clothes. We follow the mandates of our society, we follow other gods besides our true God, and we find ourselves more tightly bound than ever.

But here is the good news! You are unbound and you are free and you do not have to bind yourselves up again! Christ has set you free, free to follow him, free to serve. Brothers and sisters, especially my younger brothers and sisters, you are free, free at last, and this is a time to call out joyfully, that you are free, and thank God almighty for this gift!

AMEN