
Lazarus, Come Forth! Call and Response

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Lazarus, come forth!
,Unbind him and let him go!
John 11.1-45

Sometimes, when the preacher proclaims from the pulpit, or asks a question from the pulpit, he wants you to ponder an answer silently in your heart. It is rare in the Episcopal Church that he expects expect a vigorous, vocal response.

But today is different! Today, I want you to respond. Today, whenever I say, "Lazarus, come forth," I want you to respond: "The dead man came forth."

"Lazarus, come forth!"
"The dead man came forth."

Excellent. That is called "call and response." It makes for a lively sermon, if something is being said. And it also makes for a lively religion. Let's try it again;

"Lazarus, come forth."
"The dead man came forth."

"Call and response" is not just a lively sermon, Call and response is the eternal pattern of religious relationship. For religion is always about relationship, about being connected, about being connected to God and to each other, about being connected to faithful community.

God calls us to grace and new life, again and again. But we do not experience that grace and new life until we make an active response. When our will meets God's grace, salvation occurs. This is the eternal pattern of religious relationship:

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

Throughout history, God has called forth. At creation itself, God formed the earth from an empty void. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light." And God said, "Let there be life, and there was life." And God said,

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

When Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were offered the incredible promise of grace, they had to wander into new territory, willing to live into the blessing which God had promised. God said to them,

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

When the prophets sought to comfort God's people, when the prophets critiqued and challenged the dying status quo, God cried out, "Behold, I am about to do a new thing. I will make rivers in the desert. I will send spirit into the valley of dry bones."

Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.

After Jesus had taught and healed, after Jesus had suffered and had been crucified, after he had lain in the tomb three days, God called out,

Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.

Through the early centuries of the persecuted church, when the great empires sought to extinguish the outcast little Christian church, and later when people thought the Christian Church was crushed dead by marauders and rogues, God was faithful in proclaiming,

Lazarus come forth.
The dead man came forth.

Yes, even today. Even today, in our own time, when internal despisers have slandered the church herself, when folks have said the church will die, when internal despisers have accused our own Episcopal Church of dying, God has said,

Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.

The call of God is always faithful, no matter what else is going on in your life. And the call of God always requires response.

Listen closely to this passage in the Gospel of John about the raising of Lazarus, with people of high anxiety worrying and weeping all around Lazarus.

When the person you love, and the one who really loves you so much. When that person does not come immediately to your aid. When he refuses to drop what he is doing and scurry to you, even then the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.
And the dead man came forth.

When people are crying all over you. Even when people you love are crying all over you. When all they can do is have pity, the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.

When people say, "You're a loser. You've been dead for three days. You have a stench. In fact, you stink. You've been dead for three years. You've been dead for thirty years. You really stink. You've been dead all your life." When the resisters in your life argue death, the voice of God says,

Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.

Yes, the dead man came forth. The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.

And then Jesus said something else. He called forth something else. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him; let him go."

"Unbind him."

"Let him go!"

I like these words more than I like "Lazarus, come forth." Indeed, these words may be more powerful than the words "Come forth!"

Because one set of "call and response" results in another set of "call and response." This time, the call of Jesus is not addressed to Lazarus. It is addressed to the community.

The community is all the people who were in mourning. All those who were weeping and wailing. All those who were worrying. The community was all those people who were quite accustomed to Lazarus being dead.

Unbind him;

Let him go.

That community is often how all of us act. We say we believe in resurrection. We say we believe in new life, but when we are around new life, we keep it bound up and wrapped in burial clothes.

This second call of Jesus means that, now, the community needs to assist in the resurrection.

Unbind him;

Let him go.

There are some people here -among us today-- yearning to live resurrection lives. There are some people here who have been born again; they have risen from the dead! But, they are still tangled up in burial clothes. They still have the sheets and coverings of death all over them. They are still bound up in something, bound up in old bondages, old arguments, old sin.

Unbind him.

Let him go.

You know what that's like. You know you are living a new life, but you seem somehow to still be in bondage to the old life.

Here is where we need community. We need others. Often, it is the task of Christian community to complete the action of Resurrection. Jesus has called forth new life: "Lazarus come out!" But he still has burial clothes on.

So the new words are,

Unbind him.

Let him go.

Those should be our words every new day. Unbind somebody. Where you find someone in bondage: your friend, your wife, your husband, your companion, even the stranger. Where you find someone struggling to be free, unbind them and let them go. Do not keep them tangled up in the old affairs of sin and death. Those clothes constrict and make all of us ill.

If we refuse to let someone go, when we refuse to forgive, if we refuse to see new life, it is we who are keeping them dead. The community has that power. Jesus, therefore, proclaims to all of us,

Unbind him.

Let him go.

Those are the powerfully concluding words of today's gospel. Don't hold on to the past. Do not hold on to sin. Do not hold on to death!

Let someone go today. Call them from the grave. And then release them!

*Lazarus, come forth.
The dead man came forth.*

*Unbind him.
Let him go.*

AMEN.

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