

The Ultimate Faith

By: Penny Holste

April 10, 2011. We see in Jesus the ultimate faith, because raising Lazarus from the dead was the last nail in his coffin. When he performed this miracle, his enemies decided they were going to kill him. Jesus put his entire life into God's hands, because he knew God would use it to bring life. Pastor Penny preaches today on that being the kind of faith we're called to as well.

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We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some of you know that Keith's father died several weeks ago. The memorial service was last week, and as my son and I were coming back a little early on the plane, we discovered it was absolutely full and we were in the very back seat. But it was a really interesting opportunity for me to just look out over all the collection of people that were flying together with us that day. And I wondered to myself what was going on in their minds and what kind of hopes and dreams did they have. There was a young couple in front of us with a brand-new baby. There were three high school girls on a spring break across the aisle, a couple men up front of them talking sports, and the flight attendant was crammed into a little bench way in the back. And I thought, what faith we all have as we get in this fairly flimsy structure that planes are, and fly thousands of miles over the surface of the earth. And we have faith that this little plane and this little crew will get us where we want to go safely. And I thought, if only we had that same kind of faith in God.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is really a story of faith — or a story of lots of different faiths. You've got Martha with a criticism as soon as she sees Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." And then we go on to hear about her faith. She confesses that she believes in resurrection at the end of the age. She believes and confesses that Jesus is the messiah. And yet, when Jesus takes her to the tomb and asks that the stone be rolled away, she objects. She says no, he's been in there four days. The body will smell. She believes, she has faith that Jesus could heal her brother, but that's kind of where her faith ends. She doesn't even imagine the possibility that Jesus could reclaim her brother from death.

And then there's Mary. And we don't know much about her faith. She has the same lament when she meets Jesus — "if you had been here" — but then she falls at his feet in a worshipful pose and just begins crying. Again she's trusting him, but she doesn't know what for.

And then there's Lazarus. And you wonder what it felt like to be Lazarus. He knew that his good friend who loved him, maybe his best friend, Jesus, knew that he was in dire straits and had been informed of that. And yet he wasn't showing up. How did Lazarus feel as life was slipping out of his hands, and he kept looking probably at the door thinking surely he will be here? Did he have faith right to the end that Jesus would be there for him?

And then there's Jesus. And it's so mysterious at first as to why he did not show up. He loved these people. Why didn't he prevent all this anguish and the pain and the fear? Well, he explains in two places. He knew beforehand that Lazarus was going to die, and he said, "It is so that God will be glorified, and I will be glorified." Well, that sounds very self-serving. When we think of someone being glorified we think of a star athlete, carrying the winning touchdown over the line or hitting the winning hit for the ball game. And we think is that what Jesus wants — all this acclaim and this honor

and people fawning over him? No, that's not what he means by glory. Here he means he will reflect the glory of the Father. And we see that when he prays out loud and he says to the Father, "I'm praying so that they may believe" (all those people around him) "that you have sent me." He wanted to perform this amazing miracle — that he had never performed I think in this gospel; he had not brought anyone back to life yet — to prove to the people, to help them believe that all that he had said and done, his teachings of love and forgiveness: all of it was from God.

So we see in Jesus the ultimate faith, because we know from reading a little further in the gospel that this miracle was the last nail in his coffin, that when he performed this miracle, his enemy says that's it, we are going to kill him. Jesus is the epitome of faith, as he entrusts his whole timetable, his whole life into God's hands. He didn't come back to Bethany based on the needs of his friends, as much as he probably wanted to. He didn't come back to Bethany based on the needs of himself, because he loved these people. How wonderful it would have been to rush to Lazarus' side and bring him out of this evil sickness. But he put his entire life, his entire timetable, into God's hands because he knew God would use it to bring life.

That is the faith that we are called to. Saying it very boldly, we are called — like Lazarus or like Jesus — to die so that the power of God may work through us for life. We are called to die so that God can work through us for life. And it really begins right here. Olivia went through that process today. We have this ritual dying, a symbolic dying. We don't really die physically in baptism. But something more than ritual went on this morning. Something real happened. The Holy Spirit entered her in a way that the Spirit had not been there before, beginning this process of faith, allowing her to say no to the selfishness that we are born with, and to more and more place her life in God's hands.

So we start with baptism and then that faith grows. And as I think about a life of faith, freshly back from my father-in-law's memorial I think about my father-in-law Art. There were so many things in his life that showed that willingness to give over his agenda to God. But I think one of my favorites is that when he retired at 65 as a civil engineer with the Soil Conservation Service in Kansas, he and my mother-in-law Doris could have had a nice, comfortable retirement. But instead they signed up to go to Papua New Guinea for two years to volunteer his work as a civil engineer, to go into the villages and help them. Well, it's not an easy place to live, in Papua New Guinea. It's more humid than St. Louis, and the terrain is quite challenging, if like my in-laws their responsibility was to go to these little villages in the mountain. They had to climb some really rough terrain, bringing their things with them. And there were diseases that we don't have or have as prevalently; my mother-in-law got both malaria and hepatitis while they were there. And there was the cultural barrier and the language barrier. And yet they were able to do so much. One of my father-in-law's projects was to replace a vine bridge, that crossed a roaring river far below, with a metal chain bridge, because several times a year people would fall off that vine bridge to their deaths. Another project he did was to bring water to a village so that the women would not have to walk for miles and hours carrying these plastic jugs of water, balancing them on their heads. They had fresh water right in the village. And the people were so thankful that when they would leave a village, the people would all line up with little gifts, things they had made or flowers. And my mother-in-law said, of those two rugged and sometimes dangerous years, they were the best years of her life. And I think my father-in-law would have concurred. We are called to die, so that God's power can work through us for life.

So, back to the plane. You know, as I thought about it, I thought that the faith we have that this airplane and this crew is going to get us where we want to go safely is really not at all like the faith that God asks of us to believe in him. Because when we're on a plane, we expect it to land, and then we'll carry on our plans and our dreams and our responsibilities just as we had decided we would. But God wants

us to let him be the pilot, to allow him to take our lives sometimes where we don't want it to go, sometimes where it is uncomfortable, to take our lives in places where God's power works through us for life. And if my father-in-law is typical, there is a great blessing in that kind of faith. Because as we entrust our life to God, we have this sense of abiding joy and confidence that God is with us every step of the way, loving us and caring for us. So that is the challenge and the blessing of faith.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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