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Lenten Stories from John's Gospel

Baptismal Dramas of Water, Light, and Life

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Since the ancient Jerusalem liturgy, the Church has singled out stories from John's Gospel to be read at Mass during Lent. Three of these stories—the most sacred narratives in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' public ministry—appear on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent in liturgical year A: the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus.

These three accounts are so important, liturgically speaking—particularly when a parish has adults preparing for Easter baptism—that the Church allows them to be read not only in the year A but in years B and C, too, so they can always be proclaimed during Lent.

Why give these stories such prominence? From Lent's earliest days, people were preparing for baptism, and John's stories fit beautifully into the process of Christian initiation. In time, the three narratives were read at specific stages in the Lenten preparation of catechumens for baptism on Holy Saturday. They still serve admirably in reflecting on the implications of our own baptismal faith. It will be helpful to keep your missalette or New Testament nearby so you can follow the stories in their entirety.



John's Narrative Skill

The genius of John's Gospel is the use of clever dramatic devices that pull us into the action. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tend to offer brief scenes describing Jesus' public ministry, the Gospel of John provides lengthy encounters in which we see how people react to Jesus and grow in faith.

John's narratives lend themselves to use in liturgy. John even supplies directions so that any of the three long stories read in Lent can easily be staged. For instance, he tells us what the Samaritan woman says to the villagers on a side stage while the main attention is focused on center stage, where Jesus speaks to his disciples.

Having a true encounter. John's dramatic technique matches his theology. Near the end of his Gospel, the evangelist states his reason for writing so "you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" (20:31). He reaches out to "you" on the principle that everyone in every time and place must encounter Jesus in order to have life.

The characters who encounter Jesus (the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary) represent everyman and everywoman. The stories are narrated to enable us to recognize ourselves and be drawn into meeting Jesus in our lives.

Moving beyond this world. The meetings aren't easy. In John's theology, Jesus has come from another world to reveal realities beyond human experience—realities John calls true or genuine. Yet because the Word from above has become flesh, the only language in which he can express his revelation is human language, the language from "below."

That can lead to confusion. For instance, Jesus speaks of water (the Samaritan woman), sight (the blind man), and life (Lazarus). The main people who are involved with Jesus in these stories think of well-known earthly concerns. In reality, however, our Lord isn't speaking of earthly water but of the water that springs up to eternal life. He isn't referring to physical sight but sight into heavenly realities. He isn't simply renewing a life that ends in the grave but offering a life whereby one doesn't die at all.

In John's stories, there is a constant double level of language. Those who talk to or about Jesus speak of what's important to them on one level (earth) while Jesus tries to lead them to another, more important level of realities (heaven). By reading these stories to us in the liturgy, the Church reminds us that Jesus still struggles to get us to see deeper realities.

The symbols of water, sight, and new life are closely associated with Christian baptism. The stories centered on these symbols lead us to reflect on our baptismal faith, whether we are candidates for baptism or have already been baptized.

The Woman at the Well: Faith Flows From Living Water

This first story (John 4:1–42) illustrates how difficult it is to come to Jesus in faith because of the various obstacles that stand in the way. If I were to compose a story of conversion, I might imagine a central character eager to receive God. John is more realistic: many people have a chip on their shoulder about God because they feel beaten down by the inequalities in life. The woman smarts from the Jewish dislike for Samaritans, especially for Samaritan women. That's her first obstacle to dealing with Jesus. "How can you, a Jew," she comments sarcastically, "ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

Jesus doesn't answer her objection; he isn't going to instantly change a whole world of injustice. Yet he can offer something that will enable the woman to put injustice in perspective, namely, living water. He means water that gives life; she misunderstands it as flowing, bubbling water, contemptuously asking him if he thinks he's greater than Jacob who provided a well. (Isn't "No thanks. I already have all I need" our first reaction when someone tries to interest us in something new religiously?)

Ironically, as John expects readers to recognize, Jesus is greater than Jacob; but again, Jesus refuses to be sidetracked from his main goal. So he explains he's speaking of the water that springs up to eternal life, water that permanently ends thirst. With a masterful touch, John shows the woman attracted on a level of the convenience of not having to come to the well every day for water. (People aren't so different today when they're attracted to the message of those media evangelists who promote a religion that makes life more comfortable.)

To move the woman to a higher level, Jesus shifts the focus to her husband. Her reply is a half-truth, but Jesus shows he's aware of her deception by referencing her five husbands and the man she lives with, to whom she isn't married.

Today, a far-from-perfect past isn't an uncommon obstacle to conversion. To be brought to faith, people must acknowledge where they stand, but they can take hope from the fact that Jesus persists even though he knows the woman's situation. He doesn't say, "Come back after you straighten out your life"; the grace he offers is meant to help her to change.

Avoiding obstacles. Confronted with Jesus'

surprising knowledge of her situation, the woman seeks to take advantage of the fact that he's obviously a religious figure. Her question about whether to worship in the Jerusalem Temple or on Mount Gerizim is seemingly a ploy to distract. When did she last worry about such theological differences? Even today when we encounter someone who probes our lives, we might bring up some old religious chestnut as a distraction so as to avoid making a decision.

Once more, Jesus refuses to be sidetracked. Although salvation is from the Jews, a time is coming and is now here when

DIG DEEPER

In what ways are you similar to
or different from the woman?

•
...the blind man?

•
...Lazarus?

such an issue is irrelevant: worship in Spirit and truth now takes place at both sites. The woman tries one more ploy by shifting any decision to the distant future when the Messiah comes, but Jesus won't let her escape. His "I am he" confronts her with a current demand for faith.

Digging deeper. What follows, enacted dramatically on two stages, reveals even more about faith. On center stage, the disciples, who have been with Jesus for some time, understand his heavenly symbolism no better than the woman. When he speaks of the food he already has to eat, they wonder if someone has brought him a sandwich! Jesus explains: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me."

On a side stage, the woman isn't fully convinced and asks the villagers, "Could he possibly be the Messiah?" The villagers come and encounter Jesus for themselves so that their faith isn't dependent on her account but on personal contact. We're left to surmise that, by being instrumental in bringing others to believe, the woman's own faith came to completion. And at last she drank of the water of life.

The Man Born Blind: Faith Grows Amidst Trials

The story of the Samaritan woman has illustrated an initial coming to faith. This next story (John 9:1-41) shows that first enlightenment often doesn't result in adequate faith. Sometimes faith comes only through difficult testing, even suffering.

Saint Augustine recognized that this man born blind stands for the human race. The initial dialogue where Jesus proclaims, "I am the light of the world," alerts us that more than physical sight is involved.

The basic story of the man's healing is simple. Jesus approaches the blind man, anoints his eyes with mud mixed with saliva, and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does so and comes back seeing.

The early Christian community who first heard John's account probably picked out elements of their own conversion and baptism in the blind man's story. They recognized something familiar in the blind man's coming to see the light by being anointed. Anointing became a part of baptism very early, and enlightenment was a term for baptismal conversion.

John hints further that the water has a special link with Christ since he tells us that "Siloam," the name of the pool, means "the One sent," a frequent description of Jesus. No wonder the healing of the blind man was a symbol of baptism in early catacomb art.

Besides recognizing a baptismal theme, readers of John would also learn that a series of testings may be necessary before

sight really comes. Only gradually and through suffering does the man born blind come to full faith and enlightenment.

The four steps in his progress each involves an encounter: (1) When queried by onlookers, the man born blind knows only that "the man called Jesus" healed him. (2) Brought before the Pharisees and pressed with theological questions, he advances to conclude that Jesus is "a prophet." (3) After being threatened with expulsion from the synagogue, he recognizes that Jesus is a man "from God." (4) Having been expelled, he encounters Jesus, who has sought him out and now asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" At last, the man says, "I do believe" (perhaps the baptismal confession required in the Johannine church).

How many of us come to believe in our hearts only when difficult decisions test our faith in God and Christ? It's then we understand what it means to say, "I do believe."

Interpreting the Sabbath. It's not only from the man born blind that we learn about faith. His being healed produces a division (Greek *krisis*, English *crisis*) among those who interrogate him. In the Johannine view, an encounter with Jesus or his work forces people to decide and align themselves on one side or the other.

Particularly interesting is the division among the Pharisees. John favorably presents those Pharisees who decide Jesus cannot be sinful because he does such signs (healings), but we should

also seek to understand the other Pharisees who decide Jesus isn't from God because he doesn't keep the Sabbath.

Their thinking: God commanded the Sabbath be kept holy; our ancestors decided kneading clay was menial work that violated the Sabbath; Jesus kneaded clay on the Sabbath, violating God's commandment. We should be careful about religious judgments that apply, without nuance, past decisions to new situations.

Dodging the issue. We can learn about faith from the blind man's parents. John contrasts the man born blind, who, step by step, was brought to sight physically and spiritually, with the opposing religious authorities, who could see physically but gradually became blind spiritually. The evangelist is also interested in those who refuse to commit themselves one way or

the other. The parents know about their son but refuse to say anything about what Jesus has done for him lest they be thrown out of the synagogue.

Today, there are those who decide for Jesus at a great cost to themselves. Perhaps an even larger group are those who have been baptized and nominally accept Jesus but aren't willing to confess him if it costs anything. In John's view, that's as serious as denying him.



The Raising of Lazarus: Faith Tested by Death

As we come to the final narrative (11:1–44), note the different staging techniques in the three stories. The Samaritan woman remained close to Jesus for much of the drama and entered into a fairly long dialogue with him. The man born blind said nothing to Jesus at the beginning, wasn't in contact with him through most of the scene, and exchanged words with Jesus only at the end in a moment of piercing light when he confessed Jesus. Lazarus never says a word to Jesus (or anyone else) and appears only in the last verses.

In each story, a different stage of faith is illuminated. The Samaritan woman illustrates an initial coming to faith; the man born blind illustrates an emerging faith that acquires depth only after testing; the Lazarus story illustrates the deepening of faith that comes through an experience of death.

John's Lazarus story leads us to a deeper understanding of Lazarus' death in the same way that the disciples, Martha, and Mary come to a deeper understanding. Lazarus was loved by Jesus; when he dies, the disciples are troubled by Jesus' seeming indifference. They misunderstand when he speaks of Lazarus being asleep. As with blindness in chapter 9, life and death teach about earthly and heavenly realities.

Martha, the chief dialogue partner in the drama, already believes Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that her brother Lazarus will participate in the resurrection on the last day. Yet hers is an incomplete faith, for she wishes her brother had never died and hesitates when Jesus orders Lazarus' tomb opened.

Jesus brings Lazarus back to earthly life, but that isn't his purpose in having come to this world from above. (A person brought back from the grave isn't necessarily better off or closer to God than those who haven't yet died.) Jesus comes to give life that cannot be touched by death so that those who believe in him will never die. True faith includes belief in Jesus as the source of unending life. Such immortality, however, cannot come in Jesus' public ministry; it awaits Jesus' resurrection.

Embracing the symbolism. We encounter more unexplained symbolism in the Lazarus narrative than in the other two stories. We're never told, for instance, that Martha and Mary came to fully understand Jesus' words, "I am...the life."

We also hear that Jesus shuddered, seemingly with anger, when he saw Mary and her Jewish friends weeping. But the evangelist doesn't clarify why Jesus reacts in this way at what seems like well-intentioned grief.

Nor does John interpret why Lazarus emerges from the tomb tied hand and foot with burial bands, his face wrapped in cloth. Only when we read the account of Jesus' tomb (20:6–7) does that symbolism become clear. Jesus rises to eternal life, never



to die again; therefore, he leaves behind his burial wrappings and the piece that covered his head for which he has no need. Lazarus was brought back to life enveloped in burial cloths because he was going to die again.

Although the raising of Lazarus is a tremendous miracle, bringing Jesus' ministry to culmination, it's still a sign. The life to which Lazarus is raised is natural life; it's meant to symbolize eternal life, the kind of life only God possesses and Jesus as God's Son makes possible.

Facing our final test. How does this fit into Lenten reflections on faith? Even after the struggles of initial faith (the Samaritan woman) and a faith made mature through testing (the man born

blind), facing death often constitutes a unique challenge to belief. Whether the death of a loved one or our own death, it's the moment when we realize all depends on God. No human support goes with us to the grave. Credit cards, health insurance, retirement programs, and human companionship stop at the tomb. We enter alone.

If there is no God, there is nothing. If Christ hasn't conquered death, there is no future. This brutal realization causes trembling even among those who have spent their lives professing Christ, and it isn't unusual for people to confess doubts as they face death.

Paul cries out that death is the last enemy to be overcome (1 Corinthians 15:26), an insight John captures by placing the Lazarus story at the end of Jesus' public ministry. From it, we learn that no matter how fervently catechumens make or already-baptized Christians renew a baptismal profession in Lent, they may still face a last-moment test of faith.

It will be precisely at that moment when we're confronted with the reality of the grave that we need to hear and embrace the bold message Jesus proclaims in John's Gospel: "I am the resurrection and the life." Despite all human appearances, "whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live."

We began Lent reminded that we will return to dust. We end at Easter with the proclamation of new life.

Raymond E. Brown, SS, was a Catholic priest, a member of the Sulpician Fathers, and a prominent biblical scholar. Fr. Brown died in 1998.

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