

John 11: 1-45 Present Tense Salvation

The gospel passage I just read is another very lengthy but well known text from the Gospel of John. It is full of verbs which dramatically move the story forward to the presentation of the last sign in John and the proclamation by Jesus in verse 25: "I am the resurrection and the life." The passage begins with a description of Jesus' friendship with this family, the two sisters Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. We hear how Mary and Martha communicate to Jesus that Lazarus is ill: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Jesus knows the illness will be fatal if nothing is done, but tells those around him when he receives the message that "This illness does not lead to death". This is another way the writer of John's gospel points to Jesus' divinity—his foreknowledge of all that will happen and what he will do. He knows the seriousness of Lazarus' illness. His comment to the disciples reveals that he will change the outcome, but they misunderstand and think Lazarus is just sleeping. In the previous chapter John relates how Jesus has already drawn opposition from those John terms the Jews who have tried to arrest and stone him while in Jerusalem for a festival, so he has left the Jerusalem area and is again teaching by the Jordan when this message about Lazarus comes to him. Verses 5-6 "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." He remained where he was—or as my mom would have said "he tarried there." The Greek word literally means he dwelled or abided there for two more days after receiving the message about Lazarus' illness knowing the outcome of the illness would be death. It is important to note in this account that Jesus was not delayed, but he delayed—he intentionally did not rush off to visit Lazarus' bedside. This two day period is significant because the Jewish understanding was that the soul remained with the body for three days after death. This delay means it will be four days before Jesus arrives at the home of his friends. This means that what Jesus does when he gets there cannot be misinterpreted; there has been no mistake. Lazarus is dead beyond hope. Verses 7-8: "Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.'" The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Even the disciples are aware of the danger of going back toward Jerusalem where opposition to his work is great. This understanding is voiced by the disciple, Thomas who was called the Twin. Thomas, whom we often remember for his words after the resurrection, in verse 16 says: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." So Jesus heads back toward Jerusalem and the crowd of Jews that has gathered around Martha and Mary, offering comfort to them in their grief. The news of Jesus coming reached them before he arrived at their home. Martha goes out to meet him with something that sounds like reproach. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She adds to this confidence in a different outcome had Jesus been present a statement which seems to anticipate what Jesus will do. "But even now I know God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus then tells her "Your brother will rise again", which Martha understands as an event in the distant future—an event which will take place "in the resurrection on the last day." Not all in the Jewish tradition believed in resurrection on the Day of Judgment, but for those who did—Martha's statement was the correct one. Jesus does not seem happy with her answer. It seems Jesus wants to expand her understanding of who he is and what he is offering. Jesus' response is stated in the present tense. It is to tell Martha "I am

the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha affirms her belief that Jesus is the Messiah. She then goes and fetches Mary who has stopped at the place where Martha had met him. Mary, who is weeping, followed by those who had gathered in their home who are also weeping goes to Jesus greeting him with much the same reproach that Martha did. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus, it is now said also weep. The "Jews" who have joined the scene see this as a sign of Jesus' love for Lazarus. Some more modern day interpreter's of the scene think this is a sign that Jesus is grieved by the lack of faith from those gathered. Verse 37: "But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying.'" There is a third possibility—the possibility that Jesus identifies with those he loves who have lost a loved one. Not only have they lost a loved one, they have also lost confidence in the present-tense redemptive power of God. Lazarus has died. Jesus, although divine and powerful, is not unmoved by our plight. Jesus, the Word made flesh, shares our lot as well as our life fully and completely. God's redemptive activity which Jesus represents—the import and consequences of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension which in John's understanding are all one act of redemption—have immediate implications. What God has promised through Jesus is not only about life eternal with God or even about God's forgiveness on that last day—but it also about making a difference now—it makes things possible now—it opens up opportunities and options now—it transforms relationships now. The promises of God are present tense—not just future tense. When Jesus raises Lazarus, he does it by calling Lazarus by name to come out. This use of a verb is in the form of a command. In this command Jesus gives life back to Lazarus—Jesus has told Martha that not only "I am the resurrection, but has also said that I am life. . With love, Jesus gives life to Lazarus—he restores life. It is ironic that the aftermath of this act of restoring love precipitates the decision of the chief priests to kill Jesus because so many come to believe in him. But we need to remember that Jesus still issues that call to us—to come forth into a new way of living. Jesus loves us with a love that restores us; can cast out fear and allow us to truly live as one of God's beloved. Yet even after he comes out of the tomb—John's narrative does not stop there. Lazarus emerges with his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face covered. Jesus then issued a second command, this time to those gathered witnesses. "Unbind him, and let him go." Although the restoration, the redemptive act which raised Lazarus was God's, those present were also given a role to play. In the same way today, we are called to participate in the ongoing work of God to renew and restore the world. This narrative illustrates that God can and does work in many ways, even through tragedy which may make it difficult for us to understand. In this narrative the emphasis was clearly on God's restoring and redemptive activity in that moment. We usually see God's redemptive work as being equated with salvation. So how does this narrative about Lazarus' being raised relate to our understanding of salvation for we often think in the same terms that Martha and Mary did when they went to meet Jesus after Lazarus' death. So let's consider what we know about that word salvation.

I listen to NPR when commuting back and forth from home to Gastonia. It is actually amazing the wide range of topics one can learn about that way. This past week because I met with James Holeman and John Pea about specials services during Holy Week, I was on the road on Tuesday and got to hear an interview with an editor of the Meriam-Webster dictionary—a

lexicographer. They discussed different words, the roots of some words from other languages and how the meanings have changed with usage. The statement the lexicographer made which really caught my attention was that the meanings attached to a particular word carries with it ethnic and cultural associations. One of the interesting facets of translations from one language to another is that rarely does a word have only one meaning or usage. So my question for today considers how we understand God's redemptive activity--the definition of salvation so to speak. A standard dictionary will have two usage definitions for salvation. The first listed is that it means preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin or loss. That is the generalized definition. The second definition is a theological one: it is deliverance from sin and its consequences which for Christians is believed to be brought about by faith in Christ. If you check out the meaning in a Greek dictionary the emphasis is on the verbal nature of the word: to rescue, to liberate, to keep from harm, to preserve. These are obviously very similar to the meanings English gives to the noun salvation. If you really want to pursue the matter, a theological dictionary of the New Testament devotes 37 pages to the definition and uses of that Greek verb. My pursuit of these various takes on the word salvation is related to what seems to be our focus on salvation as a noun; a noun describing either something that has happened in the past or will happen in the future. A Baptist friend of mine frequently talks about his work with youth in his community and relates how many "were saved" at a particular event. A side note to that is that as a Reformed Theologian my thought is that the whole world was saved a little over 2000 years ago. But this type of thinking tends to make salvation a static event—something associated with the past—separate from current happenings, a point that fits on a timeline. Often we view salvation as something that happens on the other end of the timeline—the future. Salvation as a reward which occurs at our death; or it is what protects us at the Day of Judgment. Another issue that we have as Reformed people is that our center of gravity is in the sovereignty of God; that God provides all that is necessary for life and accomplishes all that is necessary for our salvation. We are justified not by our works, words, or actions, but by God's grace and activity alone. We believe they we do not earn God's favor by what we do—or lose it by what we don't do. But within that framework, do we really believe that God doesn't want us to do anything at all. Considering how much of Scripture—the whole of the Law—offers specifics about what we are to do for our neighbor and the world—it seems we are called to action on many fronts. This is where I think we need to think of salvation in the present tense. Because we do not enjoy God's favor and the future God has in store based on our actions, we are therefore freed, rescued, liberated. That is the good news of the gospel message, but what does it mean for our lives NOW. What does present tense salvation look like? Present –tense salvation means we are freed to throw ourselves into caring for our neighbor and creation, to respond to the needs around us, to seek to help those who are hurting simply, to follow the model given to us in the life of Jesus because we already enjoy God's promise of life now and into the future. Thanks be to God.