

# THE PRODIGAL / Sun. April 10, 2011

## Sermon: “Lazarus, Come Out!”

Sermon by: Fr. Bill Wigmore

*The first reading tonight is taken from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous:*

Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking (and drugging) as intensive work with other alcoholics (and addicts). It works when other activities fail. This is our twelfth suggestion: *Carry this message to other alcoholics and addicts*. You can help when no one else can. You can secure their confidence when others fail. Remember they are very ill.

Life will take on new meaning. To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends – this is an experience you will not want to miss. Frequent contact with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot in our lives.

Your job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful. You should not hesitate to visit the most sordid spot on earth on such an errand. Keep on the firing line of life with these motives and God will keep you unharmed.

*Psalm 91. You who live in the shelter of the Most High will say to the Lord:*

**\*“My refuge and my strength; my God in whom, I trust.”**

*For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler \*And from all the terrors of the night*

*He will cover and protect you completely \*And hide you in the shelter of his wings*

*A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand*

**\*But it will not come near you.**

*You will look all around you with your eyes \*And see it is only the foolish who fall.*

*Because you have made the Lord your refuge \*And dwell in the shelter of the Most High*

*No evil shall befall you \*No terror shall come near your tent*

*Those who love me, I will deliver \*I will protect those who know my name*

*When they call on me, I will answer \*I will be with them in their time of trouble*

*I will rescue them and honor them \*I will grant them new life and show them my salvation*

*This is a modern version of a reading taken from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy:*

This commandment that I’m setting before you today isn’t too much for you, it’s not out of your reach. It’s not on a high mountain – you don’t have to get mountaineers to climb to the peak and bring it down to your level and explain it before you can live it.

And it’s not across the ocean – you don’t have to send sailors out to get it, bring it back, and then explain it before you can live it. *No!* The word is right **here and now** – as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest. *Just do it!*

Look at what I’ve done for you today: I’ve placed in front of you Life and Goodness / Death and Evil. And I command you today: Love God, your God.

Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly, blessed by God, your God, in the land you are about to enter and possess. *Choose Life!*

*A reading from the good news according to John:*

Now someone named Lazarus had fallen ill; he was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This was the Mary who anointed the Master with oil and wiped his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was sick.

So the sisters sent for Jesus: *"Master, the one you love is sick."* But when Jesus heard this he said, *"This illness is not fatal; it is to show God's majesty, so God's son also will be honored by it."*

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he lingered two more days where he was; then he says to the disciples, *"Let's go to Judea again."* The disciples say to him, *"Rabbi, just now the Judeans were looking for an opportunity to stone you; are you really going back there?"* *"Aren't there twelve hours in the day?"* Jesus responded.

*"Those who walk during the day won't stumble; they can see by this world's light. But those who walk at night are going to stumble because they have no light to go by."*

He made these remarks, and then he says to them, *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him up."* *"Master, if he's fallen asleep,"* said the disciples, *"he'll revive."* (Jesus had been speaking of death, but they thought that he meant he was only asleep.)

Then Jesus told them plainly, *"Lazarus is dead; and I'm happy for you that I wasn't there, so you can believe. Now let's go to him."* When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days earlier. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away, and many of the Judeans had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; Mary stayed at home.

*"Master,"* said Martha, *"if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Still I know that whatever you ask of God, God will grant you."*

Jesus says to her, *"Your brother will be resurrected."*

Martha responds, *"I know he'll be raised in the resurrection on the last day."*

Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and life; those who believe in me, even if they die, will live; but everyone who is alive and believes in me will never die.*

*Do you believe this?"*

*"Yes, Master,"* she says, *"I believe that you are the Anointed, God's son, who is to come into the world."*

At this point she went to call her sister Mary, telling her privately, *"The Teacher is here and is asking for you."* When she heard that, she got up quickly and went to him.

(Jesus hadn't yet arrived at the village; he was still where Martha had met him.)

When the Judeans, who hovered about her in the house to console her, saw Mary get up and go out quickly, they followed her, thinking she was going to the tomb to grieve there.

When Mary got to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell down at his feet.

*"Master,"* she said, *"if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died."*

When Jesus saw her crying, and the Judeans who accompanied her crying too, he was agitated and deeply disturbed; he said,

*"Where have you put him?"*

*"Master,"* they say, *"come and see."* **Jesus wept.**

So the Judeans observed, *"Look how much he loved him."*

But some wondered: *"He opened the blind man's eyes; couldn't he have kept this man from dying?"*

Again greatly agitated, Jesus arrives at the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay up against the opening. Jesus says, *"Take the stone away."*

Martha, sister of the dead man, replies, *"But, Master, by this time the body will stink; it's been four days."* Jesus says to her, *"Didn't I tell you, if you believe you'll see God's majesty?"* So they took the stone away, and Jesus looked upwards and said, *"Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me, but I say this because of the people standing here, so they'll believe that you sent me."*

Then he shouted at the top of his voice, *"Lazarus, come out!"*

The dead man came out, his hands and his feet bound in strips of burying cloth, and his face covered with a cloth.

Jesus says to them, *"Unbind him and let him go."*

### **Sermon: Welcome!**

- Some gospel stories have our names written all over 'em!
- **So if you're just getting out of detox – we welcome you back from the dead!**

...Now I guess each of us has a favorite image of what recovery's all about.

One of the images **the Big Book uses** is picturing us *as men and women* drowning in the middle of some very rough sea.

And it says: *recovery's as if some fellow addicts come along in a life-boat and they pluck us up from the icy waters and save us from almost certain death.*

... **And in another place**, the Big Book says, *recovery's like our being ship-wrecked and washed ashore* on some strange desert island. But unlike that TV show, we need to *help one another* if we hope to survive ourselves.

But a recover image that's always been a favorite of mine, is the one Bill Wilson used whenever he stepped in front of an AA group to tell his story.

And for some reason, it's an image that never made it into the Big Book –

It's *the image of the cave – and it's an image that I think goes along really well with tonight's gospel.*

See, back in the winter of 1934, Wilson's alcoholism had him near death.

He'd been detoxed 3x and each time he was released from the hospital, **he relapsed – he just couldn't stay sober.**

His doctor had declared him "a hopeless alcoholic" and he told Bill's wife to get herself prepared for the worst. And so, when his *newly sober friend* Ebby came to call on him,

he found Bill sitting in his kitchen, *severely depressed*. And who wouldn't be!

- Bill was *down* to the point where he was even contemplating suicide – **he was ready to choose Death over Life.**
- **I've been to that place in my life and my guess is some of you have been there too.**
- And *the Lazarus story* reminds me of the way Wilson tried to describe those feelings he had – what it was like inside him – Deep inside – in the places people never get to see.

Bill said his alcoholism was as if he was chained *hand and foot* to the back-wall of *some very long, dark cave; and try as he might*, he couldn't break free.

He said he could still see his family and his friends standing at the mouth of that cave;

and they were there calling to him and begging him to come out - **But the truth is: Bill didn't know how.**

Bill said *he wanted to stop drinking – but every time he tried, he failed*; and each time he failed it seemed like he got pulled back still deeper into that cave.

And then Wilson said, when his friend Ebby visited him – he saw **his first little ray of light**. He knew he'd finally come *face to face* with another addict who'd also been chained - but *somehow he'd* managed to find the way out of **his** darkness.

- Ebby was an alcoholic whose problem was every bit as bad as Bill's.
- He too had been a hopeless drunk –
- And yet, **there was Ebby!** – Sitting in front of him - *sober and free*
- “*Unbound*” - *to use the words of tonight's gospel* –
- ... Ebby had come to lead Bill into the light he had found.
- **His visit started Bill Wilson's journey back from the dead.**

*Like Lazarus*, and like many of us here tonight, Bill was given a chance to **choose Life** -Choose Life and learn to live it in what the Big Book calls: “*The sunlight of the Spirit.*”

Now **living life in the Sunlight of the Spirit** is, *I think*, a pretty good description of what John's whole gospel is all about.

John's gospel is sometimes called “*the mystical gospel*” – and I've heard **us alcoholics & addicts** sometimes described as “*the misfit-mystics of the world.*”

We've got more than our share of **writers, and poets, and artists** among us.

- (Of course, some of us are just *bullshit artists* – **but even there** we can take that art to *dazzling, new heights!*)

And we addicts & alcoholics love to live life out on the edge — We crave excitement!

God, save us from boredom! We want to keep those juices flowing inside cause that's the closest we've come to feeling life!

I know I did my share of acid back in the 60's – and so I like a gospel that triggers some of that dopamine in my brain and delivers some *shock and awe!* **John's gospel can do that!**

And **of the four gospels** the Church chose to tell us the story of Jesus – John's is very different from the other three. John's gospel – isn't trying *just* to tell us a story about Jesus. John's trying instead to tell us **what Life feels like** when it's really lived – **lived with him** at the center & not us – When Jesus is present *and with us* – and we feel him at the very core of our being.

And so John tells some stories that us alcoholics & addicts can probably wrap our minds around pretty well: Stories of wedding feasts – where they run out of wine - but Jesus is there to make *even better tasting wine* out of water.

- Most of us know the terror of *running out* of our supply.
- John's gospel wants us to imagine the joy of tapping into *an endless supply* of something that feels even better than booze or drugs.
  
- And John tells another story of a woman Jesus meets at a well – a Samaritan woman who's lower than scum in her own eyes and in the eyes of everyone she knows –
- And yet, when *Jesus looks at her* and sees her differently from the way the whole world is seeing her.
- **And there at the well**, he offers her what John calls: “*living water*” – water from a well that springs not out of the ground, but straight from God and runs through Jesus.
- **You've gotta be a mystic to grab the meaning of all that!**
- Jesus says: “*Drink from this well and you'll never thirst again.*” Not a bad deal for an alcoholic!

And then, if you were here last week, you heard John tell us about Jesus giving sight to a man who was blind from his birth. ***But now, John says, this man knows Jesus in his heart.*** And as he comes to know him, he's brought out from his darkness.

- ***He was blind – but now he sees.***

And then **in tonight's story**, we might say that ***John tackles the big one.***

- Having Jesus with us in life is all well and good – *but what about in death?*
- Can Jesus really be trusted *to be there too?*
- And so, maybe as a sort of ***grand finale to all the signs and miracle stories of Jesus***, John tells the story of Lazarus.

We hear that Jesus has a friend whom he loves – a man named Lazarus who's fallen sick. His sisters are concerned, so they send word to Jesus that he needs to come and he needs to help their brother.

- (**The message is clear:** *When Jesus is close-by these people feel safe; but when he's away - they're afraid.*)

Notice how Jesus doesn't get too upset in the story when he's told that his friend is sick.

He doesn't race off instantly and rush to fix him. *Jesus isn't co-dependent like Martha and Mary!*

Jesus lives his life in the sunlight of the Spirit and so he knows that deep down, ***Lazarus is OK.*** No matter what happens on the surface of his life, ***Lazarus is OK.***

*"This illness isn't fatal,"* Jesus says. "Our friend Lazarus has just fallen asleep."

- So Jesus stays where he is - he "*lingers*" the story says - for two more days. And then very abruptly, Jesus says to his disciples, "***Lazarus is dead.***"

Now this can all sound a little confusing unless we understand

that John's simply telling us **where Jesus is at**

in his own consciousness – **where Jesus lived his life – and where we need to live ours. He lived it trusting completely in God.**

- Jesus understood and maybe he even helped to write page 449 in the Big Book where it says – "*Acceptance is the answer to all my problems. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me (in my mind) and in my attitudes.*"

Now one thing *about Jesus* we always need to be reminded of is that he wasn't some **Holy Superman.**

Jesus didn't just drop out of heaven and "*come down to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men.*" **Jesus was human.**

He lived a fully human life just like you and me –

The only difference was this – **Jesus kept choosing Life** –

No matter what happened to him, **he chose Life.** And part of being human is to suffer and to grieve – especially when we suffer the loss of a loved one.

And so John says: Jesus goes to where the body of Lazarus was put in the cave –

and there we hear John record what's often called the shortest and maybe the most beautiful sentence in the whole Bible – "***Jesus wept.***"

- ***Jesus weeps*** because Jesus feels deeply.
- When the Spirit of God filled him, Jesus didn't become some semi-detached, new age philosopher-guru.
- He didn't run around saying, "*If you just get yourself spiritual enough then all the painful stuff that happens to you won't hurt.*"
- **Sometimes life hurts. Sometimes life is terrifying. Sometimes it all seems like it's more than we can stand.** Then it's good to remember that "Jesus wept" –
- And there are times we need to weep too.

Jesus felt the death of his friend *just like you or I would feel the death of a loved one.*

Jesus knows what our pains are like.

And because he does, Jesus felt the pain of Bill Wilson's alcoholism – just like he feels the pain of each & every one of us here – ***Jesus wept.***

The crowd sees Jesus crying and they say, "***Look at how much he loved him.***"

But then they start to ask questions. They try to make Jesus into the kind of redeemer ***they would be*** if they were in his place. So they ask, "*He opened the eyes of the blind man, why couldn't he have kept this man from dying?*"

**And so in his story - John goes ahead and obliges them.** Jesus lives his life so fully in God – so trusting in Him – that John says he can bring *the sunlight of his spirit* to shine its light even in the darkness of our graves.

Jesus says, "***Take away the stone.***" And then he shouts, "***Lazarus, come out!***"

St. Paul writes that **there is no thing** - absolutely **no thing** – that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ. There's no power on the earth,

- No power *above* the earth, and no power *below it* that can ever separate us from God's love in Christ. ***Not even death.***
- And that's exactly the point of John's story.

Now there's one final thing to notice here – *and then I'll shut up.* Notice that ***Jesus doesn't roll away the stone.***

- He asks the people who are there in that community in Bethany to do it for him.
- ***That's their job*** –
- The stone that's blocking Lazarus won't be rolled away **without their help.**

And when they do that – and when Lazarus *does* step out of the tomb – *then notice once again* – that **Jesus** doesn't untie the burial cloths that are wrapped tightly around his body. But yet again, he says to that Bethany Group – "**You unbind him** and ***set him free.***"

For us alcoholics and addicts, I really do believe that God has entrusted into our hands the power of Life and Death. When we choose a Life in Recovery – we don't just choose it for ourselves – we choose it for all the suffering alcoholics/addicts who are still locked in their caves and still bound to their addictions. When we choose Life we're given the power to bring that new Life not only to us, but to all those who still suffer.

So whether your image of recovery is being plucked from the icy water – or washed ashore on the beach or freed from a cave – ***we all need to remember this:***

There are so many more *just like us* who are trapped in their addictions-

So many more who need for us to come back for them and to say:

*"Lazarus, come out!*

*or Charlie, come out!*

*or Maria, come out!*

***Come out! And let us show you a way out of your cave –***

But this time: **No more death!**

This time: ***Choose Life! Amen.***