

- As a priest, death is never far away from my thoughts. While we do far more baptisms than funerals here at St. Ann's, there is always someone in the parish in some danger of death, and I regularly get called to the hospital to give Last Rites to those on death's doorstep.
- Yet, the daily handling of the great mysteries of our Faith through the administration of the Sacraments, most especially by offering Mass in which I hold the sovereign Lord of the universe in my very hands in the Eucharist, repeatedly impresses upon me God's goodness.
- Who but God could be so good to us – willing to become one of us, to suffer and die for us, to pardon our sins, to heal our ills, to console our sadnesses? Only God can be *that* good.
- As you read through the Gospel of John, from which we read again today, you find that John details a series of 7 signs pointing to Jesus' goodness and divinity.
- Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke portray for us a variety of miracles worked by Jesus, John depicts far fewer miracles, but he gives us much greater detail about those miracles.
- The 7 special miracles that St. John describes are: 1) the changing of water to wine at Cana; 2) the healing of the official's son; 3) the healing of the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda; 4) the feeding of the 5000; 5) the healing of the man born blind (which we heard last Sunday).
- Today's story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is the 6th of these 7 signs. And the 7th sign is Jesus' own resurrection from the dead.
- There's a progression of sorts amongst these signs, which each miracle being a little more dramatic than the preceding miracle. So the first 6 signs are all building up to the 7th and most important and dramatic of signs: Our Lord raising Himself from the dead.
- So, in coming to this 5th Sunday of Lent and reading the story of the raising of Lazarus, the Church is giving us final preparations for all that will happen in Holy Week. There's a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection, and clear proof of His goodness and divinity.
- On this 5th Sunday of Lent, we also enter into a period known as "Passiontide," which coincides with the last two weeks of Lent.
- This name comes from the fact that, during this time, we focus very specifically on our Lord's passion and death as a proximate preparation for His resurrection.
- As part of Passiontide our statues are covered with violet shrouds – violet burial cloths – as a reminder of the reality of death that we must all must face.
- But they also provide a way to *visually* fast from the consolations provided by our saints and our Lord so that we can concentrate on the essential elements of Christ's work of redemption.
- Veiling is meant to clear away distractions so that we might focus on Jesus who calls us through the *death* of the cross to a *life* of holiness. The veils remain in place until Holy Saturday, when we prepare the church for Easter.
- To properly prepare for Holy Week, we are called by today's readings to meditate on death, and to understand the true nature of death and how we can all be freed from the bonds of death and raised from the tomb. It starts with our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel 37.
- What we hear today is actually part of the famous passage of the dry bones being resurrected into an army of skeletons before Ezekiel, which has an important tie to the story of Lazarus, and is why we read this passage today.
- Our Lord says to Ezekiel: "Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them...!" Obviously, Jesus opening the grave of Lazarus and calling him forth is a sign pointing to Jesus' divinity.

- For whom else but God could raise a man from the dead and call him forth from the tomb?
- Of course, the physical tomb that we will be buried in when our bodies die is not the most fearsome of tombs with which we must be concerned. More important for us to consider is the tomb of mortal sin, which encases our souls and threatens our eternal salvation.
- And this is the point good St. Paul is getting at in our 2nd reading today from his Letter to the Romans, as he speaks of spiritual life and death.
- If we are living for the flesh – that is, living sinfully for ourselves and our own pleasure – we cannot please God. Not only can we not *please* God, but we cannot *be with* God if we die in such a state, for God and sin are mutually exclusive.
- But through the saving waters of baptism, we receive the Spirit of God dwelling within us. And “if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also...” says St. Paul.
- So, spiritual death is the death we must all fear, not the death of our bodies. It’s not cancer, or heart attacks or strokes or fatal accidents that should worry us most, but rather pride, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, greed, and sloth – what we call the 7 deadly sins.
- While it is good to take care of our bodies and our physical health, it is far more important that we care for our souls to ensure their good health by repenting of our sins. This is the best way for us to prepare for Holy Week and for Easter.
- Lastly, we have the epic story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb, which details one of Christ’s greatest miracles, but also includes the magnificent confession of faith by St. Martha: “I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.”
- While we can be amazed by the physical aspects of this miracle – a man who was clearly dead and even buried for 4 days, walks out of his grave at the command of Jesus – what’s more important are the spiritual aspects of what Jesus says here.
- When Jesus commands that Lazarus be *untied* and *let go* from his burial bands, the Greek verbs used here are particular. For John employs the same verbs elsewhere in his Gospel to speak of being “untied” from the devil’s power, and “let go” from the bonds of sin.
- So in our Gospel story, Jesus is calling us out of the death of sin to a life of freedom from the entrapments of the devil, a life of freedom in His grace, as He commands Lazarus to be untied and let go.
- As wonderful as it is to see a dead man raised from death to life, it is even more miraculous and wonderful to see a soul resurrected from mortal sin to sanctifying grace through baptism or the Sacrament of Confession. For this is the truest life!
- St. Ambrose, the great 4th c. bishop of Milan once said: “To the good man, to die is gain. The foolish fear death as the greatest of evils; the wise desire it as a rest after labors and the end of ills.”
- His point is that the death of our bodies should not concern us if we believe in Christ and have Christ living within us through the grace of the Sacraments. For in the death of our bodies, we will find eternal life for our souls.
- As we enter Passiontide these last 2 weeks of Lent, let us be ever intent upon caring for the health of our souls, seeking healing for the sickness of venial sin and resurrection from the spiritual death caused by our mortal sins, through our worthy reception of the Sacraments.
- May we, like Lazarus, be raised by Christ’s goodness and divinity from the death of sin and be prepared for our resurrection to eternal life by God’s grace and mercy.
- St. Ambrose, pray for us!