

SERMON: Unbound

10-31-21

TEXT: John 11:32-44 Revelation 21:1-6a

*Nim's Island* is a delightful adventure movie about an 11-year-old girl and her father who live on a deserted island. One day the girl's father, who is a scientist, takes his boat out to sea and allows his daughter Nim to stay on the island alone. In the night, a great storm comes up and the father's boat becomes a shambles, still floating, but barely usable. He can't communicate with his daughter, and he can't get back to the island.

They have all the comforts of home on this remote island in the South Asiatic Sea, so Nim eventually makes contact by e-mail with Alex Rover, the author and main character of her favorite adventure books. Nim begs Alex Rover to come and help. What she doesn't know is that the author Alex Rover is a woman who has created the man Alex Rover. He is an adventurer and a hero, but she is an obsessive compulsive agoraphobic who hasn't left her apartment in 16 weeks and can't even get out to her mailbox without having a panic attack. She practically bathes in hand sanitizer and she lives on a diet of Progresso soup. She also has conversations with her imaginary namesake and alter ego. She'd like to

help this little girl, but she doesn't know how to overcome her fears. "Touch the world," he encourages. "I don't want to touch the world," she argues. "It's not sanitary."

There's no backstory to tell us what happened to Alex Rover that made her so afraid to leave her home. But she is a character that reminds me of Lazarus. Although she writes best selling novels and communicates with the outside world, she is – for all intents and purposes – entombed in her own home because she's afraid to leave it. Physically she is alive, mentally she is very sick, but emotionally and relationally, she is dead.

Of course, Lazarus had a good excuse for not coming out of his tomb: he really was dead. And Jesus raised him from death and called him to come out. But I think there is so much more to the story than that.

We entered the story today at the point where Lazarus has already died, and his sister Mary was out looking for Jesus. When she saw him, she knelt at his feet, but then seemed to accuse him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not

have died.” You see, Jesus had been sent word that Lazarus was very sick, but he didn’t come to him right away. Mary was understandably angry, and perhaps even blamed Jesus to a certain extent. But Jesus took no offense. Instead, he asked to see the place where Lazarus had been laid.

Now here’s the thing that I love and appreciate most about Jesus, and it’s the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus began to weep.” He saw other people crying, and he was “deeply moved.” He had just lost one of his best friends, and he was “greatly disturbed in spirit,” to the point of feeling sick to his stomach. Jesus reacted like any of us would; Jesus wept. Jesus understands our pain. Jesus cries when we cry.

Mourners in the crowd began to accuse Jesus: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” We, too, want to know, why do bad things happen to good people? Why doesn’t God intervene and save us? Why do miracles happen for some people and not for others? But as we will discover, there is more than one way to be saved.

Jesus then asked for the stone to be removed from the entrance to the cave which entombed the body of Lazarus. But Martha reminded him that the odor would be strong, as Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus' reply had nothing to do with her concern; he spoke only to assure her that he was about to reveal the glory of God. The stone was removed; Jesus said a prayer to his Father God; then he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

He who was dead, was called out of his tomb, and was alive again.

Now the controversy begins: Should we take this story at face value, believing that Jesus can literally bring the dead back to life? Or should we read this as a metaphor, understanding that this death and resurrection are only symbolic of the little deaths we suffer and the new life that Jesus can bring? Not wanting to limit the power of God, I believe that if God wanted to bring the dead back to life, God could make it happen. However, that situation is not very relevant to most of us.

Personally, I get more out of the story when I see it as a metaphor that can apply to our lives here and now. When Jesus didn't intervene to prevent Lazarus from dying in the first place, I see it as a lesson that stuff happens. Death happens. Bad things happen to good people. That's just the way the world works. Into every life comes both sunshine and rain.

And when bad things happen to us, we die a little. We might describe the feeling as wanting to "crawl into a hole and die." We feel like we're trapped, entombed in a cave; our hands and feet are tied up and we're overwhelmed by the stench of suffering and pain. There's a large stone in front of the opening - so many obstacles - and we can't get out.

Though he doesn't save us from the pain, Jesus calls us out of our tombs. There's an old Jewish folktale about a widow who loses her son in a tragic accident. She was crazy with grief and mourned her loss so deeply that no one could provide her with comfort. Finally a friend took her to the house of a holy man where she made a sobbing plea: "Use your powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able by prayer or some magic to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief." The old man spoke kindly to the woman. "Bring me a mustard

seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to remove the pain from your life.”

The woman decided to begin her search by visiting the home of a wealthy family, thinking tragedy was less likely to strike them. She knocked on the door and when a woman answered, the widow said, “I am in search of a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place?” “You have come to the wrong house,” was the answer. The woman inside sobbed as she described all the tragedies that had touched her family. The widow remained in that home for many days, listening and caring.

As she continued her search, her travels took her from mansion to hut, but at every home she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her a willing and careful listener. Soon she became so involved in comforting others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed, never realizing that it had indeed driven the sorrow from her life.

There's something about each of these stories that I want you to notice.

Alex Rover was called out of her tomb by a little girl in need. When Lazarus came out of the tomb, Jesus said to his friends and family, "Unbind him, and let him go." When the widow was overcome with grief, a friend took her to see the holy man. You see, Jesus calls us out of our tombs, but he calls the community to unbind us. "We get by with a little help from our friends."

Don't you imagine that when Lazarus walked out of that tomb, Mary and Martha and others – now unconcerned about the stench – probably went running to help him? Jesus likely didn't even have to ask, for they didn't hesitate to take the cloths off his face and hands and feet.

As we honor the saints that have gone before us, those who shared their faith with us, those who demonstrated new life in Christ, may we also strive to bring others to Christ. As a community of faith, may we strive to BE Jesus for others, to move the stone and unbind them in every way we can. May we strive to be saints for others... to the glory of God.

AMEN.