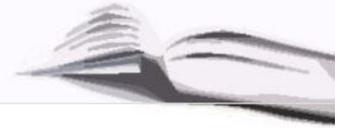


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John 11:1-45

This story about Lazarus shares much in common with that of the Samaritan woman at the well. With the Samaritan woman the issue was seeing Jesus as the source of living water as compared to ordinary water. Here the issue is to see Jesus as the source of living life as compared to ordinary life.



Year A
Lent 5
April 6, 2014

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [John 11:1-45, The Message](#) or [John 11:1-45, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "[Affirming Life](#)."

I'm not sure who first made the observation that in the Gospel of John, Jesus' ministry begins at [a wedding \(John 2:1-11\)](#), and ends at a funeral. This is the funeral. It is the last sign that Jesus will perform before entering Jerusalem for the last time.

Then, as now, weddings and funerals were filled with heightened feelings, and those present were demonstrating their bond of loyalty and love to the concerned family.

Then, as now, weddings and funerals were highly structured events - filled with expectations and customs of what was right and proper.

And so, as we read this story, we too need to be engaged as those who are filled with heightened emotions of loyalty and love; as those who are anxious to properly fulfill all that is expected and customary at such a time as this.

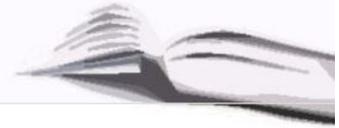
***Aside:** I've mentioned elsewhere that one of the things that bugs me about the Lectionary readings during Lent is that they leave out the actual historical mounting conflict between Jesus and the Judean authorities. So that when we finally arrive at Good Friday, we have no way of understanding why this bloody deed is happening, other than, "It is God's will." (Which it most definitely is not. I'll say more about this elsewhere as well.)*

For example. We've skipped over Chapter 10, and so have not read,

The (Judean authorities) took up stones again to stone him.
John 10:31

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Then (the Judean authorities) tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

John 10:39

Nor do we read of the reaction of the Judean authorities to Jesus' raising of Lazarus, and so we leave today not knowing:

So from that day on (the Judean authorities) planned to put (Jesus) to death.

John 11:53

So I have at least included Verses 46 to 53 as part of the text below, [John 11:1-53, The Message](#) or [John 11:1-53, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#), so that you might read the whole story.

I also liked this comment from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (Page 195, see footnote below.):

Commentators have often noted that this story about the raising of Lazarus shares much in common with the story of the [Samaritan woman](#), ([John 4:5-42](#)).

It is primarily about Jesus' interaction with the women: first, with Martha, and second with Mary.

With the Samaritan woman, the issue was living water as compared to ordinary water; with the Bethany sisters, the issue is living life as compared to ordinary life.

Brilliant! That's the sermon right there: living life as compared to ordinary life.

Now for the background commentary - and remember - with heightened feelings of loyalty and love and desire to do all that is right and proper.

At the end of Chapter 10, Jesus left Jerusalem and, "went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there." (John 10:40)

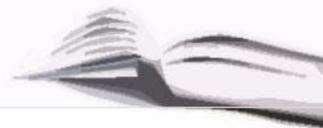
Notice that key word used by John, "remained." Jesus is not idly hanging out, he is remaining / abiding. And where Jesus abides is potent with possibilities because of his loyalty and love for his Father who abides in him.

Verses 1 to 6. This is our first encounter with this family in John. And the somewhat abrupt - but also detailed way - John introduces them suggests that the writer assumes we in fact already know them. After all, these are people who Jesus loves. Somewhere, somehow, outside of the written story, Jesus has met and formed a family-like bond of loyalty and kinship with them.

The repetition of the fact of Jesus' love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus emphasizes the bond between them. And Mary's later anointing of Jesus is an intimate act that would only occur with a close family member further highlights the closeness between Jesus and these three.

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I am uncomfortable with the NRSV translation of **Verse 4**: "**so that** the Son of God may be glorified through it." The translation suggests that God causes Lazarus' death so that I much prefer Eugene Peterson's translation in The Message:

When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son.

It will indeed become an occasion.

These three all seem to be unmarried, without living parents, and without other siblings, since none of these other close family members are mentioned. They also seem to be living in same household - presumably that of their deceased parents. The order in which they are named in **Verse 5** also suggests their birth order: Martha is the oldest, Lazarus the youngest.

Verse 6. As readers who are deeply concerned with doing everything that is right and proper, we are shocked at Jesus' response in Verse 6. The sisters would not have sent word to Jesus unless they felt it was urgent, and Jesus' delay - without sending any message back to the sisters - is highly unexpected, and therefore wounding of his relationship with the sisters - possibly even insulting to them. His behaviour is not that of loyal, intimate, family friend. As unmarried women, they are extremely vulnerable, and Jesus' lack of response would be doubly troubling to them.

Verses 7 to 16. We now have one of those conversations where Jesus says something; it is taken literally and thereby misunderstood; he explains further.

Verse 7 is a wonderful illustration of the mistranslation of the Greek word for Judeans as "Jews." (See my note, [It's "Judeans" Not "Jews"](#), for more explanation of the tragic consequences of this simple error.)

Jesus says, "Let us go to Judea again." And the English translations have the disciples responding, "Rabbi, the Jews" Clearly the word should be translated directly as, "Rabbi, the Judeans" And, to be more clear, as "Rabbi, the Judean Authorities" Because, after all, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are all Judeans and they treat Jesus like a member of their family.

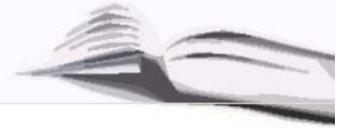
Wherever you see "Jew" in an English translation, cross it out. Get out your black ink pen and cross it out. And write in "**JUDEAN AUTHORITY.**"

Verses 9 and 10. These verses play on Jesus' previous teaching that **HE** is the light of this world. He is also playing on the fact that he expects the authorities will act by stealth, at night, and so they are safe during the daylight.

Verses 11 to 16. Now we get a play on the word "sleep." Confusion is caused because the disciples take Jesus literally; but he is speaking metaphorically. Lazarus is literally dead; but metaphorically asleep.

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Verse 15. Remember to also get out your black ink pens whenever you see the word, "believe," and change it to, "TRUST." Jesus is not doing this so they - and we - might have an opinion. He is doing this so that they - and we - might trust him. Bond with him. Be loyal to him.

Verse 16. This is the first time Thomas is named as one of the disciples. It is too bad that he is known by his later "doubting." (John 20:25) Based on this verse, we would be calling him, "Loyal Thomas."

Verses 17 to 27. This conversation with Martha is the second time that a woman testifies that Jesus is the Messiah. (The other time was the conversation with the [Samaritan woman](#).)

Verse 17. The information that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for 4 days means that he is really, really dead.

According to Malina and Rohrbaugh (Pages 199, 276-277, see footnote below.) at the time of Jesus it was believed that the life force of the body stayed in close proximity for 3 days. So the repeated statement (Verses 17 and 39) that Lazarus had been in the tomb for 4 days stresses that he is beyond all hope of life.

Bodies were laid in stone tombs where they underwent a year-long process of putrefaction and purification as the flesh and organs rotted away. At the end of the year, the bones were then placed in a box called an ossuary and re-buried in anticipation of the general resurrection when the bones would be knit together in new life.

Verses 18 and 19. The explanation about the proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem, and that "many of the Judean authorities had come" suggests that the family had some high social standing with the Jerusalem elite. Then, as now, large numbers of important people at your funeral is an indication of your honour.

Verse 21. Too bad we can't hear Martha's tone of voice. Her comment, "my brother would not have died," could be an affirmation of faith; or have an edge of, "So why did you let us down and not come when we sent word to you, as a loyal friend would have done, and spared us from this grief?"

Verse 22. Martha's statement, "Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him," shows her complete trust in Jesus - there are no qualifications, conditions, or hesitations. It also repeats a theme that is throughout John:

Jesus is not doing anything on his own. Not by his own power. Not by his own authority. Not by his own honour. Everything is being done because of his relationship with God, and it is because of this relationship that it is God who acts through and at the request of Jesus. It is God acting; God's power; God's authority; God's glory.

Verses 23 to 27. Once again we have a statement by Jesus; a misunderstanding; a further explanation that leads to deeper bonding. To understand the full power of this conversation, it is crucial to see how

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exceptional it is for Jesus, a man, to have such a conversation with Martha, a woman. And to see the clarity and intelligence with which Martha engages Jesus. She is a woman who knows and who learns.

At first Martha understands Jesus as simply referring to the belief in Resurrection that was taught by the Pharisees - a faith that she shares.

Verses 25 and 26. Go ahead. Get out your black ink pen and change "believe" to "trust" in these verses.

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?

Makes quite a difference doesn't it? Why do those who trust in Jesus never die? Because they are bonded with Jesus; they share his life; they live in him; they share his fate. They die - yes. Jesus also died. But like Jesus, because they have bonded with Jesus, because they live in Jesus, they too will also be raised to new life.

Verse 27. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, Martha now makes an affirmation about Jesus that confirms she is a fully enlightened and bonded with Jesus.

Verses 28 to 31, provide the transition from a private conversation between Martha and Jesus, to a conversation between Mary and Jesus that is witnessed by Judean mourners who have come from Jerusalem.

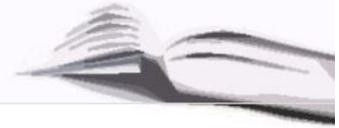
Verses 32-34. Like Martha's first words to Jesus, Mary's statement, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," can be read either as a simple statement of faith, or as a public rebuke - "If you had behaved like a truly trustworthy friend, you would have made the effort to be here in time to heal my brother before he died." Jesus' response, which the NRSV translates as "greatly disturbed," could also be translated as, "deeply indignant."

In the context of this passage, we need to read "the Jews" as "Judeans from Jerusalem who have close social ties - and therefore social obligations - to Lazarus." They are family and close associates who have come to Bethany to pay their due respects. They would have an instinctive reaction against the presence of Jesus who was a non-family, Galilean outsider in the midst of a close-knit social gathering to mourn Lazarus. His presence would only be acceptable to them if he behaved in a way that demonstrated he was a true and honourable friend of Lazarus.

Verses 35-38. Jesus weeps, and as the text says, this is a clear sign of Jesus' great love for Lazarus. However, this demonstration of great love raises again the question: If Jesus loved him so much, why did he not do the proper thing and come in time to keep him from dying? Which we know he could have done, because we know he has opened the eyes of the man born blind. These are comments that only those who consider themselves to be the true friends of Lazarus could make - evaluating the loyalty of an outsider. To which comment Jesus is again either greatly moved or greatly indignant.

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Verses 39-40. Martha's comment again emphasizes that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days and so his body is beyond the possibility of being made alive again. Jesus' reply - again - could be read either as a simple statement of fact, or as a public rebuke of Martha: "You have not trusted what I have already told you."

Verses 41-43. If we delete the aside that Jesus makes to the bystanders, his prayer is simply, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. Lazarus, come out." This prayer makes clear that the restoring of Lazarus is not a magic trick performed by Jesus, but a blessing bestowed because of the complete alignment of the Son with the Father.

And if we pay attention to the aside, we hear Jesus continuing his argument with the Judean authorities from Jerusalem back in Chapter 10:

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe trust me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe trust me, believe trust the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

John 10:37-38

Verse 44. The dead man walks out of the tomb still wrapped in the clothes in which his body was wound for burial - evidence that this is indeed the same person placed in the tomb 4 days ago.

Verse 45. Ending this reading at Verse 45 is an outrageous abuse of the text.

It leaves us with a happy ending that is totally false and misleading.

If the authors of the Lectionary had allowed us to read a few verses more, we would discover that for some of the Jerusalem crowd, restoring Lazarus to life was the final straw that convinced the religious elite that Jesus was too dangerous to continuing living. And so from this point forward, we move toward Jesus' arrest, false charges and trial, torture, brutal execution, and burial in a tomb.

A tomb from which he shall emerge, not merely restored to this life as Lazarus was, but resurrected - still dead as far as ordinary "life" is concerned, but already fully alive in the eternity to come.

David Ewart,

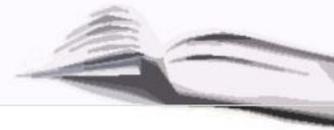
www.holytextures.com

Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, see link below, pages 193-201.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

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John 11:1-45 (NRSV)

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

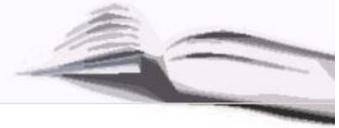
⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

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³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.
³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."
⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"
⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.
⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."
⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"
⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.
⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.
⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.
⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."
⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all!
⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."
⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation,
⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.
⁵³ So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

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John 11:1-45 (The Message)

¹ A man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This was the same Mary who massaged the Lord's feet with aromatic oils and then wiped them with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Master, the one you love so very much is sick."

⁴ When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son."

⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ but oddly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he was for two more days. ⁷ After the two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea."

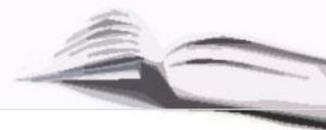
⁸ They said, "Rabbi, you can't do that. The Jews are out to kill you, and you're going back?"

⁹ Jesus replied, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in daylight doesn't stumble because there's plenty of light from the sun. ¹⁰ Walking at night, he might very well stumble because he can't see where he's going."

¹¹ He said these things, and then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up."

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¹² The disciples said, "Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine." ¹³ Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about taking a nap.

¹⁴ Then Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. ¹⁵ And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him."

¹⁶ That's when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, "Come along. We might as well die with him."

¹⁷ When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, only a couple of miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews were visiting Martha and Mary, sympathizing with them over their brother. ²⁰ Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house.

²¹ Martha said, "Master, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. ²² Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you."

²³ Jesus said, "Your brother will be raised up."

²⁴ Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time."

²⁵ "You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. ²⁶ And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ "Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world."

²⁸ After saying this, she went to her sister Mary and whispered in her ear, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you."

²⁹ The moment she heard that, she jumped up and ran out to him. ³⁰ Jesus had not yet entered the town but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When her sympathizing Jewish friends saw Mary run off, they followed her, thinking she was on her way to the tomb to weep there. ³² Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, "Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

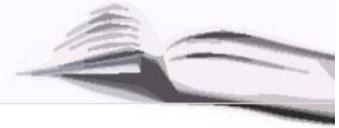
³³ When Jesus saw her sobbing and the Jews with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him. ³⁴ He said, "Where did you put him?"

"Master, come and see," they said. ³⁵ Now Jesus wept.

³⁶ The Jews said, "Look how deeply he loved him."

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³⁷ Others among them said, "Well, if he loved him so much, why didn't he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man."

³⁸ Then Jesus, the anger again welling up within him, arrived at the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

The sister of the dead man, Martha, said, "Master, by this time there's a stench. He's been dead four days!"

⁴⁰ Jesus looked her in the eye. "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ Then, to the others, "Go ahead, take away the stone."

They removed the stone. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, I'm grateful that you have listened to me. ⁴² I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I've spoken so that they might believe that you sent me."

⁴³ Then he shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ And he came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face.

Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him loose."

⁴⁵ That was a turnaround for many of the Jews who were with Mary. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some went back to the Pharisees and told on Jesus. ⁴⁷ The high priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Jewish ruling body. "What do we do now?" they asked. "This man keeps on doing things, creating God-signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on, pretty soon everyone will be believing in him and the Romans will come and remove what little power and privilege we still have."

⁴⁹ Then one of them—it was Caiaphas, the designated Chief Priest that year—spoke up, "Don't you know anything? ⁵⁰ Can't you see that it's to our advantage that one man dies for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed?" ⁵¹ He didn't say this of his own accord, but as Chief Priest that year he unwittingly prophesied that Jesus was about to die sacrificially for the nation, ⁵² and not only for the nation but so that all God's exile-scattered children might be gathered together into one people.

⁵³ From that day on, they plotted to kill him.

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