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Lent 5A
Peace, Seattle
April 10, 2011 epk
John 9:1-41

GOING WHERE IT STINKS

In Latin: *Pediculus humanus capitis* – in English: *head lice.*

Reading those words on a letter coming home from elementary school is enough to strike fear in the heart of the most experienced parent. Hearing the news first from your child's cubby mate—whose family has been dealing with the little beasts for three weeks—ratchets things up a notch.

When we got the news that Friday afternoon, there was too much else going on to deal with it right then. So Saturday morning, after googling "head lice," I started preemptively pulling sheets, blankets, and pillows from all the beds, gathering all the clothing we'd worn the last week, and bagging up the scores of stuffed animals that hang out in our house; meanwhile Chris started checking heads to see whether head lice had made the leap from the cubby mate's head to Kai's, and from Kai's to our own.

But if you've ever done this, you may recall that distinguishing between lice nits and the other kinds of debris that can be found in human hair, is not as easy as it may seem—not the least reason being that lice nits are less than one-quarter the size of a sesame seed!

So after finding the "Jr. Scientist" microscope Kai inherited from the Bermes kids – thanks Bermes's – and replacing its leaking batteries, we rigged up a slide with a suspect strand of Kai's hair and studied it at x-10 magnification. **The result? Suspicious, but inconclusive. What were to do now?**

Chris had heard of a professional service company called (get ready…) "LICE KNOWING YOU" that would examine our heads for a small fee to see whether the beasts were present or not, and if they were, would, for a much larger fee, take care of the problem. But that solution seemed way over the top to me. We ought to be able to figure this out on our own, for gosh sakes!

But after several trips to various drugstores to acquire special nit combs and head lice eradication kits, I had more questions than answers. Saturday had slipped away and with it the last open appointment slot at "Lice Knowing You," and all we had to show for the day was frayed tempers, ill-spoken words, a growing collection of dubious head lice paraphernalia, and a heaping pile of laundry.

By bedtime, I was more than ready to have my head professionally examined!

We slept in sleeping bags that night, each of us on his or her own bed, with plastic bags covering the pillows and towels covering the plastic bags.[1]

Sometimes, life stinks.

You've got your own versions of the story, I know you have. Not necessarily of head lice, but of times when everything seemed to conspire against you and nothing you did to beat back the tide worked.

[1] We were able to get an appointment at *Lice Knowing You* for the following Monday. The conclusion: our family was head lice-free, no treatment necessary. We did, however, purchase one of their top of the line nit combs, just in case we received a letter from school in the future!

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We can laugh at these stories eventually—even at the ones that drive us to tears—when, finally, there is some kind of resolution. But there are plenty of stories, and families, and places in our world, where there seem to be no solutions; the stinking curveball life hurls at humankind morphs into a more serious malady, a dis-ease, a conflict, a sickness unto death; and the **stink** becomes a **stench** that we just can't shake.

These stories take us to places we read about on the front page and hear about on the evening news: Japan, Libya, Sierra Leone, Kandahar, an elementary classroom in Brazil,[2] a home in Spanaway.[3]

Today our gospel takes us to one of those places where death has stalked its prey, and won. It is death on a personal scale. A scale we, who on Friday held our sixth memorial service of the year, can understand.

Lazarus, who with his sisters Martha and Mary had become close friends to Jesus, has died. Jesus saw it was coming. And sees in this death the opportunity to make the power of God more real than ever before.

So instead of going to Bethany immediately upon receiving word, he delays; so that by the time he and the disciples finally do arrive, Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE he tells Martha, DO YOU TRUST THIS? TRUST ME?

There are so many places we might find ourselves in this story.
- Among the perplexed and befuddled disciples;
- Standing with Martha—vexed, yet still hopeful;
- Grieving with Mary and her tearful company;
- Weeping with Jesus;
- Hanging back with the bystanders and skeptics;
- Even in the tomb, with Lazarus.

LAZARUS, COME OUT! he cried. And out Lazarus stumbled, bound in burial clothes, the stench of death wrapped close around him.

We could spend a long time discussing the physiologic impossibilities of the story.
But to do so would be to miss the point, which is this: In Jesus, even death itself, the last and greatest boundary, is upended.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE means that this way of trusting to which we are called isn't about receiving a coupon for eternal life which we will one day, after death, redeem. It's about receiving the permission—no the command—to live the resurrection NOW, TODAY, RIGHT HERE.[4]

…And where is "RIGHT HERE"?

"**Right here"** is all the places in the world where the stink of life has become the stench of death.

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[2] To learn about the recent tragedy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, go to: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2014714688_brazil08.html
[3] Learn more about this tragedy at: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2014694075_apuschasesuicide9thldwritethru.html?prmid=obinsource
[4] Barbara Brown Taylor's, *The Dress Rehearsal*, from God in Pain, Abingdon Press, 1998. Page 66.

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"Right here" is in the homes of the half dozen families from our congregation who have lost loved ones in the past 3 months.

The first graders at Kai's school are studying "HOMES AROUND THE WORLD" this month. The first field trip they took was to Tent City[5] (a commentary in and of itself). His strongest impression: the smells—of cigarettes and unwashed bodies.

Jesus is calling us, his church, to the smelly places of the world; pushing us toward those open graves—not so we can bring Jesus there but so we can find Jesus already there, working toward the way to call forth new life.[6]

The great irony of the raising of Lazarus, of course, is that Christ's enemies, upon learning that death no longer controls him, decide they must kill him, rather than live with the uncertainty of such divine power. If we, as church, insist on following Jesus to the smelling places of the world, we can be assured that we will run the risk of death stalking us, too.

But the truth is, I have already been there, and so have you. Your baptism was your funeral, your death.

> "We have been buried with him," Paul writes, "by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might life a new life." [Romans 6:4]

All the reeking rags of sin were washed away, and having been buried, you, dear brother, you dear sister, no longer live under threat of death—it has no power over you.

There is lots of stink, lots of mess, lots of death in this world; it's close at hand; it's on the other side of the world. And that's we're called to go; that's where we've been called, by Jesus, to follow.

Amen.

[5] Learn more about Seattle's Tent City for the homeless at: http://www.npr.org/2011/02/07/133443255/seattle-supports-homeless-camp-putting-down-roots
[6] I'm indebted to Bishop Chris Boerger for insights on this text he shared in a sermon at the Bishop's Convocation on April 5, 2011.