

## ***Breaking Bad***

*A Sunday Morning Message at UCC Westerly, Pawcatuck, CT*

*March 22, 2026 – The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent*

John 11:45-57

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*Breaking Bad* is an unlikely sermon title, I'm the first to admit. But, then again, so is my choice for a Scripture lesson for this week. The recommended Lectionary Scripture text for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent is actually John 11:1-45, the well-known story of Lazarus's death and subsequent raising from the dead by Jesus. I personally have preached many a sermon on the Lazarus text and it is indeed rich with insights into Jesus and his ministry, just before it comes to its end in Jerusalem. But this year, I just wasn't that excited about preaching on Lazarus yet again. So, I read the texts surrounding it and that's when I rediscovered the story immediately following the Lazarus account. It is truly a unique story providing as it does, a peek into the conversations among the Jewish authorities as they were forced to come to grips with who Jesus was in the aftermath of his miraculous response to the death of his friend Lazarus.

Lazarus's story takes up the bulk of the first 45 verses in John 11. If you're interested in all the details of the story, it's a good one to read for yourself when you get home. For our purposes this morning, I'll just provide this brief recap. Jesus receives word that his dear friend Lazarus is ill and his sisters, Mary and Martha, are requesting that he come to Bethany as soon as possible to heal him. Jesus decides to stay where he was for another two days and then tells the disciples he's going to Bethany to be with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The disciples point out that this is probably not a good idea since the religious authorities who were opposing Jesus' new teachings about God, and his rejection of much of traditional Temple worship, had been openly hostile recently. This point is a good and timely reminder to us as we read this story that, contrary to what we tend to think about Jesus, not everybody loved him. Not everybody saw him as candidate for Messiah or even as a great teacher. Some of them – especially the Pharisees and the Sadducees – thought of him only as a dangerous nuisance. Nuisance because he contradicted virtually everything

they taught was necessary to worship God. Dangerous because he risked feeding into the resentment the people felt toward the Romans who ruthlessly ruled Palestine and Jerusalem at that time. These Temple leaders were worried that Rome would attack and wipe out the entire Jewish community if they got angry enough at Jesus. Truthfully, these were legitimate fears and Jesus would have known as well that what he was doing would not be welcomed by Rome. But unlike, the religious leaders, he didn't care because he trusted in God enough to do what God needed him to do despite the personal danger.

Back to Lazarus. As Jesus was heading back to Bethany, he received word that Lazarus had died. No need to hurry. But he continued on and after what we can assume was a tearful reunion with Lazarus' sisters, he asked to be taken to Lazarus' tomb. Once he arrived there, Jesus began weeping for the loss of his dear friend. And then he ordered the tomb to be opened. He prayed to God and then cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus come out." To the shock, and we can imagine the horror of some, Lazarus came out, still wrapped in the grave clothes. Jesus ordered the grave clothes to be removed and they were. Lazarus was indeed alive.

This is where today's text picks up. In the preceding text we learn a little more background information on what had been happening before Jesus showed up. Specifically, since Mary and Martha, as well as Lazarus, had been prominent in the Jewish community, many of the people who came to support them and mourn with them were from the Jewish community in Jerusalem which was not far away. Once Lazarus had been raised by Jesus, a few of those who had been present to comfort Mary and Martha quickly headed back to Jerusalem to report to the Temple authorities what they had witnessed. The thing is, they weren't excited. They were nervous, and afraid. The text tells us that once they heard this news, "the chief priests and the pharisees called a meeting of the council" to discuss how they should respond to all this. One said, "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." This is the point at which Caiaphas, the high priest, roared at them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people

than for the whole nation to be destroyed.” In other words, as the high priest at that time, Caiaphas was essentially using his office to “prophesy” or speak for God to say that Jesus would need to be killed in order to prevent the Romans from destroying them. Not only that, Caiaphas believed that allowing Jesus to die like this for the Jewish people would actually bring them together. As the story continues on, we can assume that Jesus learns of or at least suspects the plot because the text says “he no longer walked about openly among the Jews.” And, in fact, as the Passover approaches word was put out that they were to keep on the lookout for Jesus and notify the council as soon as they saw him so he could be arrested.

Dear ones, what we have just unpacked here this morning is the back story to Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion as recounted in the Gospels. We’ll hear more about all of it next week during the Palm Sunday Symbols service. The interesting thing to note here about John’s account of this time frame is that his is the only one which goes into such detail about what the ruling Temple authorities are thinking at this time. Only John tells us the why of Jesus’ arrest, trial and death. The other three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – don’t seem to care that much about the reasoning behind the actions of the Temple authorities. Those accounts focus instead on the disciples and their actions leading up to Jesus’ arrest in the Garden. Judas is, of course, the supreme traitor. But in these other accounts the Temple authorities who are behind all of this are just part of the background. This is fascinating! And as I was pondering all of this I kept coming back to this same question: Why is John’s Gospel the only one which goes into this important background information? Perhaps it’s because John – writing almost 60 years after the events he is describing – was really curious about the how and why of the Temple authorities intentionally making a decision to follow a course of action that was essentially “breaking bad?” Or could it be that John just wanted to reveal the irony of their thinking about Jesus and the real significance of his death. Elsewhere in his Gospel John writes passionately about the significance of Jesus’ death as the atoning sacrifice for all humankind meaning that once again the Temple authorities’ perspective was far too

narrow and limiting. John wanted to show just how much the Temple authorities were intentionally “breaking bad.”

In case you don’t remember, *Breaking Bad* was a highly acclaimed television series which ran from 2008 through 2013.

“The series followed Walter White, an over-qualified, dispirited high-school chemistry teacher struggling with a recent diagnosis of stage-three lung cancer. White turns to a life of crime and partners with a former student, Jesse Pinkman, to produce and distribute methamphetamine to secure his family's financial future before he dies, while navigating the dangers of the criminal underworld.”<sup>1</sup> I confess I never watched the show, mainly because I just couldn’t understand glorifying someone’s decision to respond to a life tragedy by intentionally pursuing a criminal enterprise, especially one that focuses on producing a dangerous and lethal drug used by addicts and often leading to death. And this teacher brought a student along with him into this evil escapade to boot. I can see the dubious logic behind the series – that even a good guy can “break bad” when life throws a seemingly impossible and cruel curve ball your way. But why should this kind of thinking ever be legitimized in a major television series that became successful and made a lot of people very rich in the process? As I said, I never watched the series and perhaps there is a reference or two of some remnant of a guilty conscience on the part of the show’s lead character. In the Wikipedia write-up on the show, that’s never mentioned as part of the plot line in the ongoing show and subsequent movies it spawned. From what I can tell, the biggest challenge the teacher and student drug dealers faced was not their own consciences but dealing with the DEA and their competitors from the drug world at the same time. Even as I write this, I still can’t wrap my head around the whole concept of a lethal criminal enterprise being justified because it was for a good cause. The closest thing to a confession about the evilness of this entire criminal undertaking is the show’s title *Breaking Bad*. Presumably, at some point early on the protagonist could have chosen differently – breaking good as

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking\\_Bad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking_Bad)

it were. But clearly, there was no money in that. And obviously no plot line for a television series.

So, if I dislike this show *Breaking Bad* so much, why I am using it as a focal point for today's text about the machinations of the Temple authorities as they begin ramping up their efforts to arrest Jesus? Well, as I explained previously, only in John is the thinking behind the decision of these Temple authorities fleshed out. This is curious to me so I have to ask why. Why did John feel so strongly that he needed to make it clear that the actions of the Temple authorities were central to what led to Jesus' death on the cross. John wants his readers – us – to know beyond any doubt that the Temple authorities – the Jews as he calls them over and over again – were deliberate and intentional in their decision to “break bad.” They were ultimately responsible; John is telling us. Not the Romans. The Jews are the ones who chose to “break bad” and Jesus died a horrible death as a result. In other words, John is intent on placing blame on someone for Jesus' death. This is why he includes this information when the other Gospels don't. The other Gospels are focused on Jesus and his interactions with the disciples, with his preparing them for his death whether they knew it or not, with Jesus' own fears as the time of his arrest approached and as the trials unfolded. Matthew, Mark and Luke seem to grasp a different perspective on what really matters as Jesus' life and ministry on earth reaches its conclusion. They wanted to emphasize Jesus' unfailing love, his courage, and his commitment to do what God asked of him, no matter the personal price paid. John covers all that as well. But he begins that entire part of the closing chapters of Jesus' life by being sure his readers know whose fault it was – the Jews. Only problem with this approach is that it is clear that it was the Romans who killed Jesus for what they saw as his fomenting of rebellion among the people of Palestine. This is what the Temple authorities accused him of when they brought him before the Roman governor, Pilate. He agreed even though after speaking with Jesus himself, he did not find him threatening.

Jesus was killed for political reasons which John's Gospel illustrates perfectly. He was at odds with the Temple authorities which in turn put him at odds with the Roman authorities with whom the Temple authorities

had a very cozy relationship. The other Gospels capture this reality too but only in John's Gospel is so much effort put into making it very clear that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' arrest, trials and death. Why does this matter, you may be wondering. Good question and an important one. John's intentional laying of the blame for Jesus' death squarely at the feet of the Jews has led to millennia of persecution of Jews around the world. John framed the entire Jewish people, the entire Jewish community as evil, as "Jesus killers" when they were nothing of the kind. It was the entire political system of the time, in which all real power was clearly held by Rome which killed Jesus because he had the audacity to proclaim that God loved everyone, that loving God and loving the other was the most important thing anyone could do. Teaching people that loving God first, foremost and always and being transformed by that love into an entirely new creation – that was Jesus' crime. Because everyone's first allegiance was to be Rome, and the Roman Emperor who understood himself to be a god. This is why Rome was never going to tolerate Jesus for long. This is why Jesus was killed.

To me the "breaking bad" aspect of John's Gospel is itself a vitally important teaching moment. Why? Because it serves as a powerful reminder that everyone sins. Even someone influential enough to write one of the Gospels can make a bad decision for which there are ongoing negative repercussions, like John's decision to villainize Jews for all time. John's Gospel, with all its beauty, all its wonderful stories, still has flaws. So do all the Gospels, truth be told. And we can't be afraid to acknowledge them and confront them. Such is our task as we explore the Bible together, through sermons on Sunday mornings. Through study groups of differing kinds. Through reading it on our own. Dear ones, the simple truth is that we owe it to Jesus and to God to make the effort to know what's in the Bible for ourselves, to decide for ourselves what holds meaning for us. And guess what? We can do that. You can do that and I'm here to help, always. But you have to take that first step. You have to make the effort to read the Bible for yourself, and dare to ask questions of the text. Jesus won't mind at all. Jesus loves questions. Amen.