

“First Appearances Can be Deceiving”
John 11:17-27, 38-53
Rev. Steven P. Mueller

Many things we encounter are not what they first appear to be.

Even divine things may not always be what they appear to be

Isaiah 45:16 “Truly you are a God who hides himself.”

Luther made this a major part of his theology. God is *Deus Absconditus* – the hidden God. Luther also called this the “theology of the cross.

Do not to look for God merely in external might and glory. Look where God promises that He will be.

But we are always tempted to look for God in places he has not promised to be.

Today’s readings show us several examples of times when outward appearances were deceiving – when God hid His work from human eyes, only to reveal it at just the right time.

A living Lazarus was hidden in death until Christ revealed him

John 11 tells us about Lazarus’ sickness and death – and Jesus’ strange reaction.

John 11:5–6 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Martha meets Him, and says, “If you had been here my brother would not have died... but even now I know that God will do whatever you ask.” What a great statement of faith. But when they get to the tomb, she wavers.

Martha was caught up in external appearances. But Jesus was not. With a word, he called Lazarus out, and the dead man rose.

The appearance – the reality of death – was not the final story. God was doing something greater. God’s life was hidden there, and Lazarus lived.

Ezekiel shows us that a living Israel was hidden in dry bones

Ezekiel saw Israel as a valley of dry bones long since stripped of their flesh.

“Son of man” God asks, “Can these bones live?”

But by all appearances, the answer is no. Dry bones can’t live.

Unless God acts. “I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live.” God says he will – and God does.

And God says “I will open your graves and raise you and bring you into the land of Israel. I will put my spirit upon you and you will live.”

Israel certainly saw this as a metaphor. They could hardly see that the prophet foreshadowed an even greater blessing. God would not only raise up a dead nation, but he would open graves and raise up individual people, just as he promised.

Why? St. John shows us that God was hidden in Christ

John 1:14 “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

God came to them and they saw only Jesus – the son of a carpenter.

They looked for any other explanation.

Martha heard his words, but when it mattered most, her grief saw only death

The Pharisees saw only a threat.

The leaders tried to fix the situation with treachery.

Hidden in this human treachery, God’s plan was active.

God was hidden on the cross.

Many things are hidden in our lives

We may feel like a valley of dry bones.

Can *these* bones live? They can if the Lord calls. If the spirit breathes

God is hidden in our lives.

“You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3)