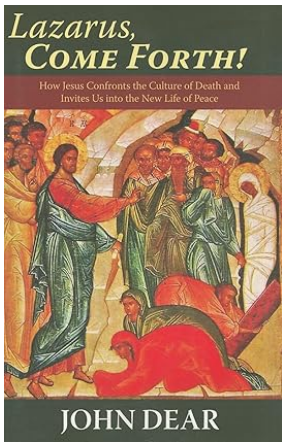
## Excerpt Page for Lent 1 — February 22, 2026

*Theme for Lent*: "Called Out from Our Cultures of Death to God's Reign of Life"

Excerpt from John Dear's book on the Gospel of John, *Lazarus, Come Forth!: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace* (Orbis, 2011)




*Pastor Paul: Despite the seriousness of humanity's enslavement to "Cultures of Death," John's Gospel portrays Jesus' faithfulness to God as being able to liberate us from that enslavement — beginning right here and now. Resurrection begins now as we trust in Jesus' faithfulness. Dear makes this point in the Introduction, pages 3-5. Here's the excerpt from John Dear:*

The Synoptics [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] speak of resurrection as a *future* reality. John doesn't dispute that view. But he adds something new. For John, the promise of resurrection is also now. In theological parlance, he preaches a *realized eschatology*. That is to say: We can live today without fear of death. We are free to renounce it, free to confront it, free to undermine the culture built on it, free to enjoy the fullness of God's life within us and among us. Resurrection in John's account means the freedom to break the unanimity of our repeated and rabid rush toward war and all the methodologies of death. For John, Jesus is the God of life come to turn the world of death upside down.

As with all of John's stories, there is always a sense that he is nudging us, by means of signs, in the direction of a larger reality, a truth beyond simple telling. Scholars have long acknowledged that John's stories work on multiple levels: the level of the narrative and the level of allegory — a kind of collective meaning that rises off the page. With the suppleness of a poet, John turns us toward his precious discovery: *resurrection is here and now, for one and all*.

And if we are free to defy deathly institutions, we are now free to pour out our lives in service to death's victims, to offer compassion, to secure justice, to inoculate the world against its own violent ways, to beat swords into plowshares and study war no more. We are freed to live as if death has no dominion *this* side of life.

It is an audacious thesis. But on this John bases the very life of the nonviolent, life-giving Jesus. In John's Gospel, Jesus' very life bespeaks resurrection. Wherever he goes, his disarming presence leaves merciless death embarrassed and impotent. Threats and dicey situations abound, but Jesus faces them with fearlessness and truth. The downtrodden who cross his path feel better, more dignified, because here is one with not a trace of violence in him. . . .

We too are summoned out of the culture of death into the way of nonviolence. All of us are called to share the risen life here and now. In John's Gospel we hear the invitation over and over: "Enter eternal life today. Do not do the works of death. I have come that you might have life and life to the full. Whoever believes in the God of life will have nothing to do with death. Live in the new freedom of love and peace!"

In chapter 11 the action reaches its peak. We hear that Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. But in this context, Lazarus is more than a friend of Jesus. According to theologian Monika Hellwig, *Lazarus represents humanity*. If this is true — and I submit that it is the key to the entire Gospel — then John has taken us into deep waters. The story of this raising is John's way of dramatizing how Jesus has come to call everyone and every culture out of the tombs of death into the new life of peace.

That is why this story is the dramatic culmination of John's Gospel. The proprietors of death —

the Sadducees, the Herodians, the courtiers of Pilate, all who benefit from imperial occupation — all feel in Jesus' message a personal threat, and so they plot his demise [in what follows immediately after the raising of Lazarus, John 11:46-57]. Death is all they know. They cannot run their empire, live off the backs of the poor, and continue to wage war if these nonviolent resisters do not fear death. So they plot to kill him.

But Jesus persists. From now on, lovers of God are free of death and its metaphors. The ruling authorities have lost their power; the sting of death is gone. Our resurrection has begun.

In confronting the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus confronts every culture of death throughout history, including our own. Here begins the abolition of war. Here marks the end of greed, poverty, executions, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, and every injustice. And it falls to us, following the example of the nonviolent Jesus, to carry on the work of life until all is fulfilled. As his followers, we are summoned to continue his story, take up his campaign, engage the culture of death through his creative nonviolence, and court resurrection by insisting on the fullness of life for one and all.

And so I offer this meditation on the raising of Lazarus as an invitation into Gospel nonviolence. My hope and prayer are that this little book will inspire us to hear anew Jesus' great command — "Lazarus, come forth!" — so that we might all leave the tombs of death and walk freely in the reality of a resurrection already realized.

The implications are rich and broad, and they brim with exciting new social, economic, religious, and political consequences. Have no fear. All of us are summoned. If we do our part for the global grassroots movement for justice and peace, then a new day of peace is truly at hand. Everyone can have a new chance to live life to the full.

May we hear the call, roll back the stone, and emerge from the world of violence into loving nonviolence. May we live life to the full in resurrection peace and welcome God's reign, here and now, for one and all.

*The phrase "Cultures of Death," however, signals the fact that what Jesus' cross and resurrection liberate us from is serious indeed. We will encounter these deadly cultures in our readings every week in Lent — making the Good News even better. But the serious of our sin is difficult to take in. Here is a brief description of our Cultures of Death from ch. 1 (p. 16):*

Life has gone awry. And questions keep coming up. How can millions starve and we not feel it? How can the nation gear up for yet another war, and we ask no pointed questions? How is it that the Cold War is long over, and we resign ourselves, still, to nuclear arsenals? How can we carry on when the earth itself suffers from our destructive policies?

Reaching for a familiar metaphor, I offer something of an answer, an inconvenient truth: we as a people have made a social contract with death. We've made a bargain with the Devil — somewhat like this: let us be reasonably safe and prosperous and we'll rock no boats, we'll turn a blind eye toward the suffering of the poor and of creation. Buy us off; we'll go quietly along.

It is, we know, a hurtful bargain, for once we sign on, our inner light extinguishes. We plow through life thereafter in vagueness and darkness, in harness to our paycheck. We count ourselves lucky for a day off now and then, a night on the town to divert us from our depression and quiet despair. Television is our sad lot — and rote living, rote churchgoing, rote dying. We are enslaved, deadened, entombed by the culture of violence.

*Thank God for the Good News of resurrection beginning here and now! Please continue to join us each week on this Lenten journey. Invite family and friends.*