



Sunday, March 29, 2020
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Centering Thought

“Remember on this one thing, said Badger.
 The stories people tell
 have a way of taking care of them.
 If stories come to you,
 care for them.
 And learn to give them away
 where they are needed.
 Sometimes a person needs a story
 more than food to stay alive.”

Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*

Prayer

God of Resurrection and Life,
 present and promised.
 You are the One to whom we call:
 for you are the One who hears,
 and you are the One who acts,
 bringing us new life
 with your grace and love and power.
 Lead us, Holy One,
 and give us the courage to follow where your lead
 in places where life is at risk—
 places where dreams die,
 places where hope seems far away,
 places where your resurrection presence is needed most. Amen.

Sacred Scripture

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 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.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is

not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” 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.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 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.” Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Pastoral Reflection

“Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.” If you need a story to see you through this Fifth Week in Lent, then perhaps this account recorded in the Holy Gospel of John, chapter 11 may be just the story your heart needs. A grace. A gift. It is a story about compassion, and hope, and life, and resurrection, to be sure. But it is also a story that speaks to the fullness of what it means to be human. It describes a family in the midst of anguish and loss. It names death and does not apologize for it, or attempt to sanitize it. Yes, initially Jesus uses the term “sleep,” but he is quick to clear up any confusion on the part of the disciples: “Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’” It’s been four days. The flowers had started to wilt. The casserole brigade had stopped coming by the house as often, and no amount of spices could disguise the stench from the tomb. Understandably, there is confusion, anger, and despair on the part of Martha and her sister, Mary. And there were tears. Apparently, lots of tears. “Jesus wept.” The New Revised Standard Version translates: “Jesus began to weep.” We don’t know for how long.

Rev. Dr. Randle Mixon reflects: “For me, there is nothing more powerful than these tears. In fact, I wonder if there could have been any raising of his dead friend without these tears. Lazarus is raised on the flood of Jesus’ tears. Marjorie Suchocki writes of the universal consequences of Jesus’ compassion for his friend. She assures us that we are not “...forsaken by God in our own times of trouble. God does not prevent trouble from happening: we are finite, we are fragile — it is not possible to live without some kind of trouble entering our lives. We all face the worst of troubles in the deaths of those we dearly love, as well as in our own impending death. God is not impassive in the face of our troubles: Jesus wept. God feels us in our pain; the love of God is empathic, a feeling with.”

Fred Craddock asks: “Is there any place where this text does not fit? Spray paint it on the gray walls of the inner city: ‘Jesus wept.’ Scrawl it with a crayon on the hallway of an orphanage: ‘Jesus wept.’ Embroider it on every pillow in a nursing home: ‘Jesus wept.’ Nail it on posts along a refugee road: ‘Jesus wept.’ Flash it in blinking neon at the bus station where the homeless are draped over pitiless benches: ‘Jesus wept.’”

I read this week over 600,000 people are estimated to be infected with COVID-19, causing over 30,000 deaths worldwide. That’s a lot of grief, anguish, and loss. That’s a lot of tears. I can only imagine how many people offered heart-rending (and wrenching) prayers, and continue to do so, only to feel as though the heavens are silent and Christ is not coming...or if he is, he’s very late.

I will confess there are elements of this story that trouble me. I am troubled by the fact that Jesus loiters long enough for his dear friend to die. Like many faithful, I understand Christ is on God’s time, not Martha’s or Mary’s or mine for that matter. However, if I’m being honest, I tend to sympathize with anyone who is hanging onto hope by a thread. Who is waiting on Christ, waiting on God, to show up. Lastly, any language about people suffering or dying so God’s glory can be revealed is deeply disturbing for anyone who have had a well-meaning person try to console us with some hollow words about this being “God’s will” or “everything happens for a reason.”

Having said that, while these aspects of the story trouble me I am grateful they are included because they make the story more honest and truthful. I am more willing to trust a story that includes

confusion, anguish, and loss alongside hope, life, and resurrection. I am more willing to trust a story that names my faith *and* fear, my hope *and* despair, my belief *and* unbelief. I am more willing to trust a story that challenges my assumptions about life, God, and what I believe is possible.

Yes, there is fear. Yes, there is isolation. Yes, there is sickness. Yes, there is death during these difficult times of ours. But, that is not the last word. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the first and last Word, made flesh, who dwells among us. Christ is God's hope with skin on it. God's compassion with skin on it. God's love with skin on it who weeps for and with us and calls us out of our tombs. Tombs of guilt and shame. Tombs of fear and worry. Tombs of grief and loss. Tombs of poverty, and war, and racism, and willful ignorance on the part of politicians, and greed on the part of those who value private and personal wealth over the commonwealth. To all this, Jesus proclaims death did not...does not...and will not ever have the last word. "I am the Resurrection and the Life," Jesus says, "Lazarus come forth!"

A poem by Joseph Cowley titled, *Lazarus*.

*I don't intend it to happen.
It just sneaks up on me
and before I know it
there's been a kind of death,
part of me wrapped in a shroud
and buried in a tomb
while the rest of me stands by
wondering why the light has gone out.
Then you, my Friend, all knowing,
seek me out and knock
at the edge of my heart,
calling me to come forth.
I argue that I can't.
Death is death and I'm too far gone
for story book miracles.
But you keep on calling,
"Come forth! Come forth!"
and the darkness is pierced
by a shaft of light
as the stone begins to move.
My Friend, I don't know how you do it
but the tomb has become as bright as day,
as bright as love,
and life has returned.
Look at me!
I'm running out,
dropping bandages all over the place.*

Thanks be to God for *this* story. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

We are not alone, we live in God's world.
 We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
 who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
 to reconcile and make new,
 who works in us and others by the Spirit.
 We trust in God.
 We are called to be the church:
 to celebrate God's presence,
 to love and serve others,
 to seek justice and resist evil,
 to proclaim Jesus,
 crucified and risen,
 our judge and our hope.
 In life, in death, in life beyond death,
 God is with us.
 We are not alone.
 Thanks be to God.
 Amen.

The Blessing

Before you were born,
 God knew you.
 You are not an accident,
 although those will occur
 And you are not a mistake,
 although you and I will make them.
 You are fearfully and wonderfully made,
 Beloved and blessed by God.
 Go now out into the world and offer it your blessing.
 Go knowing no matter where you go,
 Or where I go,
 All the ground between and before us
 Is Holy Ground.
 Go now in Peace.
 Amen.