

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

Well, this has been a Lent unlike any we've ever experienced! I've been sad that we couldn't be physically together in community for the last three Sundays, as well as today. Not only have we not been able to share in the Holy Communion in a physical way, but we've also not been able to hear together these wonderful lessons from the Gospel of John—as series of life-changing encounters. Jesus has a conversation at night with a Pharisee named Nicodemus; he meets at mid-day a presumably despised and rejected Samaritan woman at a well; and he heals a man born blind, in what I think is not only one of the most beautiful stories in scripture, but one also filled with much subtle humor.

Today, on the fifth Sunday in Lent, we find Jesus anticipating his passion and death, and we are coming to the end of the first portion of the Gospel of John, which is called “the Book of Signs”. Everything that Jesus has done is pointing toward his ultimate glorification, which is to be realized in his passion, death, and resurrection. Today's sign is the drama of the resurrection of Lazarus from physical death. As hard as this story is for us to comprehend, it points us toward what Jesus will undergo as he will die for us, be raised to new life, and bring us to share in that new life with him.

There are two elements of this long narrative that I think will especially speak to us in these challenging times we face. One is the very evidence of God's love in Jesus' presence at the death of Lazarus. When Jesus saw Mary, the sister of Lazarus weeping, scripture tells us “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 began to weep.” Or as a more familiar older translation simply says, “Jesus wept.”

Jesus is the man of sorrows, and well-acquainted with grief. As we struggle with the anxieties of the coronavirus pandemic, we may feel that our lives are out of control, and that the ever-present threats of illness and death surround us. It is a natural impulse to ask, “Why is this happening?” And any simple propositional faith we may have had can dry up and blow away. Where is this good and loving God in moments like this? The answer is simple: he is right next to us, sharing in our fear, our grief, and our uncertainty. We are not alone.

Many years ago, when my wife Catherine was in the hospital suffering from lymphoma and in the last month of her life on earth, I was standing in line at a pot-luck dinner in the parish hall of the church where I was serving. Standing behind me was a parishioner who, for some reason, had taken all of his brokenness, his anger, and his frustration with his life and had decided for some time to project it onto me.

As we stood waiting to get to the serving table, he tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to face him. “I have a question for you”, he said. “Why is your wife sick?” I was taken aback by this abrupt query. What was he angling for? Was he trying to imply that we were morally deficient and in need of God’s punishment? Was he trying to trip me up in some other way? “I don’t know why”, I replied. “Well, if you don’t know why, how can you ever help me if my wife becomes sick?” he said. At this moment, I felt offended by this aggressive manner in a time of my life in which I was feeling quite vulnerable, and I wanted to sock him in the face. But I recovered myself and said, “If you need to know why in such a moment, I won’t be able to help you. But if you want to know how Christ draws close to us and is there to love us in moments like this, I might be able to help.” I looked at him intently; he turned away from me in silence and the conversation ended.

Years later, when I had long since left the parish and learned that this man was suffering in his final earthly days with cancer, I wondered if he might have remembered our conversation. I pray that he knew something about Christ’s companionship at that time. You and I are never alone—Jesus is with us, right now as we face the challenges of the present day.

The second element of today’s Gospel passage that always strikes me is the faith of the other sister, Martha. We know the traditional contrast between these two sisters of Bethany, and Mary always gets better press. She is the contemplative one, the one whom we shall encounter again on Monday of Holy Week, as she anoints Jesus’ feet with costly perfume in an act of loving devotion.

Martha, on the other hand, is a person of action and motion, and there is a beautiful dynamism here of a living faith in this story that we must celebrate—and it might just help us out in the present day. As Jesus is approaching in the story, Martha runs out to meet him, well aware of his delay in coming, and says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

I hear two things in Martha’s address to Jesus. One is angry indignation—“If you had been here!!!...” It reminds me that we’re hearing a lot of anger, and frustration, and indignation from various people in the coronavirus crisis: “If the government had responded sooner and not waited two months!...if we had been better prepared for a potential pandemic response!...where are the medical supplies we need?...the hospital beds?...the masks?...the ventilators?...if only there had been a better response!” Wow, I get it, don’t you? It’s like Martha being brutally honest with Jesus.

But the other thing I hear in Martha’s address to Jesus is an unwavering radical trust in final deliverance: “Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” What ensues is a dialogue between the two in which Martha makes a supreme confession of faith: “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” We mustn’t overlook this confession. Many years ago in an essay about Martha, theologian Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza remarked that Martha’s confession of faith is every bit as significant as the more celebrated confession of faith that Peter makes at Caesarea Phillipi. Here

is a dynamism of honest frustration coupled with a steady certainty that in the fullness of time all will be well.

I pray that we remember that Jesus is with us right now, in all of our frustration, helplessness, confusion, fear, and uncertainty, because he loves us. And I pray that we can have the faith of Martha to know that, somehow, we will get through these trying times and come out to a new beginning—a resurrection, if you will. It will take time, and patience, and forbearance. It will not likely be this year on Easter Day...but Easter will come!

Many of you know that I am a sometime jazz musician, and if you get to know me very well you will find that I am an inveterate fan of what is called the Great American Songbook. Let me share the lyrics of a song I'm that I'm reminded of at the present time, called "Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year", by Frank Loesser:

*Spring will be a little late this year,
A little late arriving in my lonely world over here.
For you have left me and, and where is our April of old?
You have left me and winter continues cold,
As if to say that spring will be a little slow to start,
A little slow reviving that music it made in my heart.
Yes, time heals all things so I needn't cling to this fear.
It's merely that spring will be a little late this year.*

Easter, and resurrection life will come. It may be a lot slower than what we want it to be, with many trials and tribulations along the way. But as an old friend once said to me, "That which is evil, which causes suffering and death, always caves in on itself sooner or later." Let us remember that Christ is with us, and let us work together, pray for one another, care for one another, and know that in the fullness of time all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.