**Lent: *A Call to Commitment***

**Sunday March 29, 2020**

**Lent #5: “The Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:1-45)**

During my initial sermon preparations I began to wonder if this was an appropriate passage to preach on this week. After all, the main plot line of this story involves sickness and death. These days we don’t have to go too far to come face-to-face with these realities. The daily news is dominated by the sad events surrounding COVID-19 and its impact on the world. Added to this are the negative effects of isolation and social distancing. Cabin fever might be driving us all a bit crazy. So, why didn’t I choose a happier passage from the Bible that avoids the uncomfortable realities of sickness and death? Well, for starters, I set up my preaching texts months ago according to the Scripture lessons in the Revised Common Lectionary. John 11:1-45 is the Gospel lesson for Sunday March 29, the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Secondly, on closer examination, this passage is very appropriate for the challenging circumstances that we are facing since it addresses the real issues of life and death. Scripture should never be an escape mechanism for us to forget about the world; rather it speaks God’s truth into our concrete day-to-day living in the real world. Scripture gives us hope amidst the difficult, challenging and sometimes sad circumstances of life. While the story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus could take us in many different directions, I’m going to focus on *three* big lessons from this morning’s Gospel lesson.

This Gospel story and Jesus’ declaration “*I am the resurrection and the life,*” are very familiar to us, yet there are some unexpected events within the story. The chapter opens by introducing the main characters in the drama, Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary. We are also told that Lazarus is very sick (John 11:1-2). Looking for help and healing for their brother, the two sisters sent word to Jesus that Lazarus, his beloved friend, was sick (John 11:3). Under normal circumstances, one would expect Jesus to depart right away for Bethany in order to heal his dear friend, but he didn’t. The Gospel writer notes that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, but oddly enough, when he heard about Lazarus’ sickness, he stayed on *two more days* where he was (John 11:6). Why did he delay when his friend’s situation was clearly desperate? Did the Lord’s lingering indicate his lack of care for his friends? When God fails to answer our prayers immediately, do we conclude that he’s disinterested in our lives? When tragic things happen do we assume that God doesn’t care?

After his two-day waiting period, Jesus finally decided to leave for Bethany (John 11:7), only to be met with his disciples’ warnings about the potential danger he’d encounter in Judea. They reminded him that the last time he was there some people tried to stone him to death (John 11:8). Resolute, Jesus declared that there was work to be done, and not much time to do it (John 11:9-10). He knew what he had to do. Lazarus was asleep and he needed to wake him up, a veiled reference to the death of his friend and his subsequent return back to life (John 11:11-14). And so Jesus and his entourage set out for Bethany with a reluctant Thomas, who remarked, “*Come along. We might as well die with him*” (John 11:16).

By the time Jesus and his disciples completed their journey to Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days and the time of mourning was well under way (John 11:17-18). Martha and Mary’s house was filled with people offering their condolences and giving their comfort to them (John 11:19). Jesus had finally showed up, but in everybody’s mind, it was too little too late. When Martha heard that Jesus was on his way, she went out to meet him on the edge of town. Right away, she expressed her dismay at his late arrival.

“*Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died*” (John 11:21).

A little later, Lazarus’ other sister, Mary confronted Jesus with the very same words.

“*Master, if you’d been here, my brother would not have died*” (John 11:32).

Later on when Jesus, the two sisters, and the crowd of mourners were making their way to Lazarus’ tomb, some in the crowd noted Jesus’ love for his friend, but they wondered,

“*Well, if he loved him so much, why didn’t he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man*” (John 11:36-37).

Why doesn’t God act when we expect him to act? It would have made perfect sense for Jesus to have made an earlier trip to Bethany and heal Lazarus before he died. Clearly, there was a greater purpose at work here. Jesus declared this when he first learned of Lazarus’ illness, “*This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God’s glory by glorifying God’s Son*” (John 11:4). Later, when Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb and Martha objected, Jesus responded to her, saying, “*Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe”* (John 11:40).

The death of Lazarus and his subsequent return to life communicated a message that would not have been conveyed if Jesus had merely healed him. This miracle revealed that Jesus has power over death and the ability to give life. It demonstrated in a tangible way that Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). This sign also revealed that Jesus was sent by the Father and was doing his will in the world (John 11:41-42). This demonstration of God’s glory in his Son was intended to stimulate believe in him. Jesus’ delay in going to Bethany, while resulting in tragic circumstances, had a greater, divine purpose.

*Lesson one: God has a greater purpose, even when we don’t understand the events in our world.* Now I realize that this is a tricky statement to make amidst a pandemic. Many Christians are likely wondering, perhaps even speculating, why this is happening. Maybe we’re questioning why God doesn’t simply stop all of this. In Albert Camus’ classic novel, *The Plague,* a city is decimated by a pandemic. At the beginning of the plague, the town priest, Father Paneloux, preaches a fire-and-brimstone sermon, declaring that the plague is God’s judgment upon the town intended to bring about repentance. But at the end of the story, after the outbreak had taken many lives, including the life of a young boy, the fiery priest concluded that the plague cannot be God’s judgment, but instead it is a test of faith. In all honesty, I can’t give you an answer for COVID-19 and it would be rather presumptuous of me to do so. Perhaps a better way to journey through this difficult time is for each one of us to exercise our Christian faith in practical ways. What is God teaching me at this time? What am I learning about my own insecurities and anxieties? What am I learning about my relationships with others? How am I sharing God’s love with others, while maintaining safe social distance? Am I clinging to my faith in God? Even though, Martha struggled with Jesus’ failure to heal Lazarus, she still maintained her faith in Jesus (John 11:22, 27). She put her trust in Jesus, even in the face of death.

In times like these, the theological conundrum of human suffering and the belief in a loving, all-powerful God becomes very relevant. While this is a significant theological question, to explore it fully would occupy much of my talk this morning. A partial answer to this dilemma can be found in this Gospel story. Here we discover that God is deeply moved by human suffering. God loves everybody and is deeply saddened by human suffering and death. Throughout the passage Jesus’ love for Lazarus and his family is emphasized. Lazarus is the one that Jesus *loves* (John 11:3). The writer clearly tells us that Jesus *loved* Lazarus, Martha and Mary (John 11:5). When Jesus wept in sorrow, some of the mourners commented, “Look how deeply he *loved* him” (John 11:36). Jesus loved his friend Lazarus and his family and was deeply saddened by the pain and loss that his death brought.

The intense emotions of our Lord are also evident in this Gospel story. When Jesus saw Mary and the crowd with her weeping and grieving, he was “*deeply moved in spirit and troubled*” (John 11:33). At Lazarus’ tomb Jesus was “*once more deeply moved*” (John 11:38). But it’s the shortest verse in the Bible that conveys Jesus’ sorrow most clearly. With two words, a profound message is articulated - “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35).

*Lesson two: “God grieves with people in the face of death”* (Kevin Quast, *Reading the Gospel of John,* p. 84).Our God is not some distant, unmoved, disinterested deity somewhere out in the universe disconnected from our world. Not at all! Our God weeps for the world and is deeply saddened at the pain and the loss brought on by the destructive powers of death. Cling to this profound truth whenever you watch the news about COVID-19 and struggle to grasp the statistics and images that fill the screen. Remember that God is with us. So, as we face the overwhelming reality of death in our world, God walks with us. As we weep for the many lives lost in our country and around the world, God weeps with us. Whenever we are anxious about our loved ones and ourselves, God is with us.

As Jesus neared Bethany that day, Martha went out to the edge of town to meet him. With words mixed with blame and trust, Martha confronted Jesus, “*Master, if you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you*” (John 11:21-22). Although Martha was clearly disappointed with Jesus, she still trusted that he was able to do something. Her faith allowed her to accept that all was not over. Into her confusion and distress, Jesus spoke words of hope. “*Your brother will rise again,*” he said (John 11:23). When she understood his promise only in terms of a future resurrection (John 11:24), Jesus gave her even more hope when he spoke these words,

“*You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?*” (John 11:25-26).

*Lesson three: Jesus is the resurrection and the life.* In the face of death, Jesus offers us hope in his fifth “I am” saying in the Gospel of John: “*I am the resurrection and the life.”*  These verses are often read at funeral services as words of comfort and reassurance. But the horizon of Jesus’ words is not merely on the future; they touch the present as well. Jesus’ life-giving work affects our lives on two levels in two time frames. In the future, Jesus will bring physical life again by the power of his resurrection. In the present, Jesus brings eternal or abundant life by the power of his Spirit. Jesus does not merely *offer* resurrection and life; Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life*.* He fully embodies his life-giving work, so all who are united with him through faith partake in his resurrection life. Jesus liberates humanity from the devastating grip of death. When Lazarus, wrapped up like a mummy, shuffled out of the tomb, Jesus said, “*Unbind him, and let him go*” (John 11:44).

In the coming days and weeks we will continue to wrestle with the heart-breaking reality of COVID-19. In the face of such bleak hopelessness, where can we receive some sunlight, some hope? Take some time and reflect on the message of John 11:1-45 and the three things we talked about:

• *God has a greater purpose, even when we don’t understand the events in our world.*

*• God grieves with people in the face of death*

*• Jesus is the resurrection and the life*