

God's Word in Uncertain Times

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130:1-8; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45, **Fifth Sunday of Lent 2020**

I am grateful the Word of God is alive. As a living Word, the Bible speaks to our very real needs and concerns. It is not limited by time and place, but speaks to every generation in every time and place. This seems especially significant given the global coronavirus pandemic. God's holy Word speaks to us today.

In our Gospel reading, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, we encounter our Lord, Jesus, as one who **waits**, one who **weeps** and one who **witnesses** to the very power and love of God over death. Jesus not only witnesses to life, he is the "Resurrection and the life."

Jesus waits: Upon receiving the vital news, at the beginning of our Gospel reading, "Master, the one you love is ill," Jesus waits. We are told Jesus loved Lazarus, yet he waits. Why wait? He knows that Mary and Martha are anxious, fearful, and desperate for Jesus' presence and healing power, yet he waits two days before he goes to be with them. Jesus knows that waiting will result in Lazarus' death. He knows his waiting will increase the suffering of his dear friends, yet he waits.

The Scripture says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was." Doesn't this verse strike you as a little odd? If Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus so much, why would wait? John seeks to answer this question with Jesus' own words to his disciples, "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God...And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe." Thus, Jesus waiting will bring greater glory to God and a deeper faith among his disciples. In addition, the Church Father's maintained that Jesus waiting would allow Lazarus not only to die, but to be in the tomb for four days. Four days would leave no questions regarding the true miracle of Jesus raising a dead man to life.

While God's glory, the disciples faith, and Jesus' miracle are of supreme importance, Jesus waiting nevertheless brought tremendous burden, grief and despair upon Mary, Martha and all who loved Lazarus. Jesus waiting brought them immense sorrow.

Many of us have experienced firsthand the painful, sorrowful waiting of Mary and Martha. We have cried out to the Lord, but in our waiting and cries of prayer, healing did not or has not come. It is not easy to wait, to wait for results, to wait for healing, to wait for what might come from this coronavirus outbreak. The burden of waiting is all the more difficult in a time of quarantine and separation from those we love, especially for those who are in the hospital and nursing homes who cannot receive visitors. To wait, to stay at home, or to stay where you are seems counterproductive.

A few weeks ago there was a cartoon in the Juneau Empire showing Superman sitting in a chair. His mother is yelling, "Aren't you going to do something to fight the CORONAVIRUS?!" Superman says from his chair, "I'm doing it."

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This comic gives us a window not only into our own dilemma, but also into how Mary and Martha viewed Jesus waiting and staying where he was. We can hear them cry out, “Aren’t you going to do something to help our brother Lazarus in his illness? Jesus, staying where he was says, “I’m doing it.”

When Jesus does finally go to Martha and Mary, they both at different times cry out to him, “If you had been here our brother would not have died.” Why didn’t you do something to prevent his suffering? We sent word to you and yet you didn’t come and now our brother is dead. Even some onlookers said, “Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?”

There is a mystery in waiting, in staying home, when everything inside tells us to do something. Jesus can live in the mystery. Jesus can live in the waiting. In fact, Jesus’ waiting provided the very space necessary for Mary, Martha and for you and me to experience more fully God’s compassion and redeeming love. I wonder what space is opening up for us in this time of waiting? How might we, in this time, experience more fully God’s compassion and redeeming love?

In our Old Testament reading, The prophet Ezekiel gives a word of hope to a people who have been waiting in exile. Their culture is in disarray. Life was difficult in exile with many or most Israelites feeling distant, if not forgotten by God. It is in this time of waiting and exile that God gives Ezekiel a vision, placing him in a valley of dry bones – a symbol of death and hopelessness. In the vision, the bones begin to rattle and God clothes the bones with flesh and new life as a sign of great hope. Immediately following this profound vision, Ezekiel proclaims the words of first reading, “Thus says the Lord God: O

my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel...I will put my spirit in you that you may live.”

What a profound vision and sign of hope. I wonder what signs of hope might we find in our own waiting? Keep looking at Jesus.

Jesus weeps: Even though Jesus knew the power of God and the purpose of his waiting, he was, nevertheless, overcome with grief and weeps himself. In Jesus’ tears we see how he fully identifies with our suffering. Through his own tears, Jesus knows ours. If you have ever wanted to memorize Scripture, I encourage you to memorize John 11:35, “Jesus wept”. This is the shortest verse in the Bible, only two words, but it speaks volumes about Jesus, our Lord and savior, who not only understands but personally experiences our grief, sufferings, uncertainties, and sorrows. Jesus weeps for you and me. He weeps for all those whom he loves. Cyril of Alexandria said, “Jesus wept out of compassion, not only for Lazarus, but for all humanity, which is subject to death.”

By the time Jesus finally came to Mary and Martha, He was faced with the immense suffering and sorrow Mary and Martha and of all who loved Lazarus were experiencing. Moreover, it brought him face to face with his own grief over the death of his beloved friend. Again, Jesus not only enters into our suffering, but fully experiences it in his own grief and tears. Jesus wept.

I find great comfort in this paradox, God weeps. Our tears are not foreign to God. He is with us. In fact, our tears are so important to God that we are told in the book of Revelation, 21:3-4, “God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” What a day that will be! But for now, until then, it is enough for me to know my tears, our tears, your tears matter to God.

Not only did Jesus weep, we are also told that Jesus was “perturbed and deeply troubled.” The Greek word for “perturbed” can also mean “deeply moved.” Thus, other translations say, Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Two times this word “perturbed” is used. Jesus weeping reveals that he is “deeply moved” by our sorrows and pains, our grief and uncertainties. Jesus knows and understands every tear we have ever and will ever cry.

Ronald Rolheiser states there are two primary ways Scripture and Jesus understand suffering. He writes, “Scripture and Jesus place suffering and tragedy into a larger perspective in which God is understood more as redeeming suffering rather than rescuing us from it. Secondly, they assure us that God is with us, a fellow sufferer, in any tragedy.”

Jesus witnesses: It is in the very state of tears and being a “fellow sufferer” that Jesus witnesses to the great love and power of God. His tears are a witness in and of themselves, but Jesus has more to witness, God’s power over death. St. Augustine said, “The one who loved them was the healer of the sick, but even more, he was the raiser of the dead and the comforter of the sorrowful.”

Once at Lazarus’ tomb, after the stone was rolled away, Jesus claims life with his prayer and word of command. “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me. And when he had said this, He cried out in a loud voice, ‘LAZARUS, COME OUT!’ The dead man came out.” Just as Jesus, the Word made flesh, spoke creation into being saying, “Let there be light, and there was light”, so too, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out and he came out! Death could not hold Lazarus in its grip. God hears all our prayers

and conquers death by the very word of Christ. Bishop Barron states it this way: “Jesus is who he says he is, so what Jesus says, is!”

Now alive, by the power of God’s love through the voice of Jesus, Lazarus came out of the tomb tied hand and foot with burial bands and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.” Jesus, who just commanded life from death now invites people, like you and me, to unbind Lazarus. The one who waited and wept, now witnesses not only to the power of God conquering death, but to the good work of helping others become unbound from the various and many bindings in our world. As impossible as some of the bindings may seem, coronavirus being one of them, with God’s help, we can witness to the mercy and power of God and help unbind the fears, anxieties, and hopelessness many are experiencing today. In the waiting, we can be hope. In the weeping, we can offer comfort. In our lives, we can witness to the mercy and power of God to bring healing and new life.

Moreover, the unbinding reminds us that while Lazarus is alive, being truly raised from the dead, he would one day die again. In this light, the miracle of Lazarus’ being raised from the dead is a foreshadow of a much greater and eternal resurrection of Jesus on Easter.

Earlier in the Gospel, when Martha ran out to meet Jesus she said, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.” What Faith! Martha, in her grief, believed in prayer and the power God.

It is through this encounter that Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha replied, “Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.”

This is our faith. This is our promise. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God, the one who conquers death, forgives our sins and leads us to life everlasting. Jesus is our life and our hope. In this uncertain time, may we cling to Jesus, our resurrection, forgiveness, hope and life!

In this time may we trust his waiting, be comforted by his weeping, and find hope and new life in his witness.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve