

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 26, 2023
10am

Text: John 11:1-45 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

There are seven signs, or miracles, in the Gospel of John. The first is when Jesus turns water into wine (Jn 2:1-2). The last is when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Each sign is Jesus' attempt to unbind his people – unbind us – from ways of thinking and being that are a stumbling block to the fullness of life God offers.

Lazarus' name means "God is my help." He is the brother of Mary and Martha, and all three are beloved friends of Jesus and supporters of his ministry. Jesus has recently fled Judea after being threatened with stoning, which is why, when he learns Lazarus is gravely ill, the disciples urge him not to go to his friend. They are convinced it is suicide to go back to Judea.

Of course, Jesus has lived his entire life and ministry in the shadow of his death – a cross-shaped shadow. He has already told the disciples that he will freely lay down his life (Jn 10:18) and obediently journey into the valley of the shadow of death. But before he enters that wilderness valley, he decides to detour to a parallel wilderness his friends are wandering in grief.

Still, Jesus delays the trip by two days. This has always troubled me. Jesus states the delay is strategic – raising Lazarus from the dead will call attention to God's work and God's glory at a crucial juncture in salvation history. But it still feels like Jesus is betraying his friends. I sympathize with Martha's bitter cry: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" (v. 21). The glory of God feels like a poor exchange for the life of someone we love. God's work can be frustratingly opaque: This person healed, but not that one; one person spared, but not the other. If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, why then this suffering?

[pause]

Historian and writer Lauren Winner recalls a story of a twelve-year-old girl who tells her father, a pastor, that she cannot be confirmed because she is not sure she can promise to believe everything she is supposed to believe forever. Her father replies, “What you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever.”¹

On this side of eternity, we wrestle with understanding God’s will. And truthfully, faith is not faith without some wrestling. To have faith is to acknowledge the reality of evil, suffering, and death and still *choose* to believe that God is working for our good. This is what Martha does: “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” (vv. 21-22). She does not understand why Jesus did not come sooner, but she still chooses to believe that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (v. 27).

This story keeps us wrestling with God and the hope that life with God offers. Like Martha, we do not – cannot – fully understand the will of God. But also, like Martha, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world is to confess our hope that God is somehow present in the worst moments of our lives, at our deepest points of suffering, when our grief and pain is the most overwhelming and isolating.

Where does that hope come from?

Each of us will answer that question a little differently. I locate a piece of that hope in Jesus’ compassion for his grieving friends. At a low point in my chaplain residency, my supervisor asked me, “What would make you feel loved by God right now?” It was a specific question that demanded a specific answer. I told her: “I would feel loved by God if He sat down on this couch, held my hand, and cried with me. I don’t want to be alone while I cry.”

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/march-26-lent-5a-john-111-45>

This is exactly what Jesus does for his friends. When I first glanced at our artwork for this Sunday, I mistook the figure at the front as Lazarus. It is actually Jesus in a moment of great sorrow. The Scriptures say that when Mary knelt at Jesus' feet weeping, and he saw all of Lazarus' friends and family weeping, Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (v. 34). And when they brought him to the tomb where Lazarus lay, Jesus began to weep, too (v. 35). Those who were gathered there said, "See how he *loved* him" (v. 36).

God's *love* is the miracle.

When we are wandering in the wilderness of grief, suffering, depression, death – when we are wandering in that wilderness, an ordinary act of love can feel like a miracle. Jesus' compassionate love for his grieving friends is just as miraculous as his miracle of raising the dead. Because compassion is salve for the soul. Compassion literally means "to suffer with." We may not understand why God allows us to suffer, but God forbids that we suffer alone. God suffers with us, walks the valley of the shadow of death with us.

That preposition – *with* – has the power to save. Because *with* is how God relates to us in Jesus Christ. God's miracle of love is a miracle of 'with.' On the cross, God's love poured out not only for us, but *with* us as Jesus faced his death – just as we all will one day face our deaths. And in the empty tomb, God's love poured out again not only for us, but *with* us as Jesus overcame the power of death. We have been promised we will overcome death, too, when we are raised from the dead into eternal life.

With is also how God calls us to relate to each other. "Weep with those who weep," Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (12:15). Be a companion to those who are suffering. Our poetry prayer described the ministry of companioning the suffering. A companion in suffering does not – cannot – draw a map out of the wilderness. But a companion can hold our hand, and sit with us, and breathe in and out with us as we wander and wait. A companion plants seeds of compassion that God uses to transform the wilderness of suffering into a garden.

[pause]

Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life” (v. 25). This self-revelation echoes the revelation of the divine Name on Mount Sinai, another wilderness moment where God transformed the desert into holy ground. God said, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). In Hebrew, this statement is the Tetragrammaton: the four consonants YHWH. These consonants represent breathing sounds. The divine Name is the sound of God breathing.

So, when Jesus says that he is the resurrection and the life, he does not simply mean he has the power to raise the dead. He is claiming that he literally *is* resurrection and life: The breath of our Creator moving in and out of our lungs, the *ruah* – Spirit of God – companioning us through the wildernesses of our lives, breathing new life into the dead spaces.

The raising of Lazarus foreshadows Jesus rising from the dead. It also foreshadows our bodily resurrection. “You shall know that I am the LORD,” says our God, “when I open your graves and bring you up...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live” (Ezk 37:13-14). Just as John’s Gospel reminds us that eternal life is both a future and present reality, so is resurrection. If we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, then we believe that God is working the miracle of resurrection in the here and now. God has breathed God’s Spirit into us so that the everyday rhythms of our lives are imbued with this resurrection power. Like flowers in the desert, new life can be found in surprising places – even the wilderness of our suffering. The miracle of God’s love revealed in Jesus alters how we relate to life and to death. Now we have faith that God is with us in both.

[pause]

Immediately after Lazarus’ resurrection, the religious authorities make the decision to put Jesus to death (Jn 11:53). Jesus has just opened a literal grave and raised a man from the dead – a sign that could convince the masses he is the Messiah, sent to free Israel from Roman occupation. The authorities fear this interpretation will incite a popular uprising against Caesar. Even a rumor of revolt was enough to provoke a brutal military response from the Romans. So, in the interest of maintaining peace with Rome, the Jewish religious leaders decide it is time to get rid of Jesus. They set in motion the events of Holy Week, which begins next week on Palm Sunday. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, a great crowd will gather. Some will have seen and even more will have heard him call Lazarus out from the

grave. They will spread their cloaks on the ground and wave palm branches at his approach.

A voice cries out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isa 40:3-5)*

Let us prepare our hearts for prayer.