

Welcome to the second week of this Worship Moments in a time of Disruption! We will once again stop for some scripture, message, and prayer, just as you would have had you been gathered for services in your own congregation.

I am going to read the Gospel lesson that is appointed for Sunday, March 29. It's a very long one... and I know that watching someone on TV stand there and read something is really deadly! Sometimes a preacher will simply pick out a few verses to preach on... but there is a flow to this story that I think matches what we go through in our lives. So Here's what we're going to do: I'm going to read this story in pieces – a kind of back-and-forth between the scripture reading and the message that a preacher might do. Because this story fits different times in our lives.

So here goes. The story is recorded in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. It starts with a dying man...

**Gospel: John 11:1-45**

<sup>1</sup>Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

They were faced with a serious illness of a loved one. They turned to Jesus for help. We do too. For them, of course, he

was just down the road; but even so – they were doing just what we do. We fear what’s coming, and turn to Jesus...

<sup>4</sup>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.” <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

“Jesus loved Lazarus, loved Mary and Martha” ... that’s not up for question... but he stayed, he didn’t come! You can imagine the anxiety of M&M that was going through the roof! Why isn’t Jesus rushing to do something?? But he’s not. Two days go by. Then as he gets ready to go, he has this little back-and-forth conversation with the disciples. The gospel of John often uses the image of *light* to talk about living in relationship to God, and Jesus does that here:

<sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” <sup>8</sup>The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” <sup>11</sup>After saying this, he told them,

**OK, here the story picks up again**

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” <sup>13</sup>Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.

**So Jesus knows he’s dead, and now he’s going there.**

<sup>15</sup>For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” <sup>16</sup>Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

**Remember the reference to Judea being where folks wanted to kill Jesus – and here’s Thomas ready to die with him if that happens.**

<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. <sup>20</sup>When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she

went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Stop here and think about that line. "If only God would have...". Isn't that a pretty common experience for us when we face hard things in life? Why did God let this happen? There's pain here, disappointment, for some there is anger at God. In some way or another, we've all been there.

But Martha goes on, not stuck in her anger or disappointment. And the story moves on from this common experience we all have of pain and disappointment and confusion about the ways of God to something more. Now Martha reasserts her belief in the goodness of God, in the love of Jesus for her and her dead brother...

<sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Martha thinks Jesus is speaking of the resurrection after life. But Jesus is talking about the here and now, He's talking about the making life whole now.

<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" <sup>27</sup>She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

<sup>28</sup>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." <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>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." <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

So now – picture who is gathered... Mary and Martha, friends of Jesus, and their neighbors, there to console as neighbors do at the time of death. And here they meet the late arrival, Jesus, and there are mixed feelings within that mix of people about Jesus and his late arrival – Mary had the same reaction as Martha “If you’d have been here he wouldn’t have died” and the other visitors – look at their reaction! – they had heard of his healing the man born blind, and they figured if he cared enough he could have stopped this from happening too.

There’s that same reaction – why can’t God have something else happen here?!! You can sense in their comments they may even be a little disgusted with Jesus.

But then comes the climax of the story – the raising of Lazarus:

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>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.” <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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.” <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup>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.”

So there’s the story. It moves from the disappointment and hurt of loss at the beginning – things we all have experiencing – to wondering about the ways of God – which we’ve all also

done at times... to wonder at God's loving intervention and presence in our lives, giving us times to thank God for God's goodness! We've all experienced these various stages of life.

It may be that in these days we're stuck in that first phase – wondering why all this has come about us, and how God's presence might be of some practical help!

- There are some fundamentalists who are quick to say that this virus is God's punishment for this or that – much like the Pharisees in last week's story of the man born blind were sure that blindness was God's punishment on somebody – the parents or whomever. But Jesus was clear in that story that that wasn't how God works, and most of us don't blame God for the Virus....

But still, we might have that lurking feeling that somehow, God's presence should get us out of this, somehow...

- So then it's important to claim the climax of the story – Jesus does in fact intervene and bring life out of death – and **note** that John doesn't call it a miracle, he calls it a "sign!" It points to something beyond itself. It points to Jesus' words to Martha that he brings life not just at the end, but at the here and now.

Even this here and now. And I don't know just what that new life looks like, but the nature of faith is that no situation

in life is ever beyond God's reach. No heartache or disappointment or fear of what's unfolding is every beyond this sign that God can be found in the midst of it.

Pretty powerful story for these times.

And there's one other part of this story that intrigues me, because it's a little different from other miracle stories. And I think is a don't-miss-this aspect of this story for these days.

Note that as Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, *he involves other people*. He doesn't just do this himself. "Take away the stone," Jesus says. "Unbind him and let him God" Jesus says. Jesus didn't have to do that; Jesus was fully capable of bringing Lazarus back to life all by himself. Jesus involves others in this miracle, he invites others to take part in it, he draws others into his saving activity. We are invited not simply to observe what God does, but participate in it.

It's pretty common that stories from scripture speak to us in different ways at different times in our lives. At this time we're living in a time of isolation from each other that none of us have ever experienced before. Stay home. Work remotely. Avoid crowds, or even small groups. (I wish I'd have bought stock in Zoom or Skype!)

But here Jesus is inviting others to be involved in his life-giving activity. How are we part of God's presence in the lives of other people? How might a foreboding present be

transformed into a more promising future? God promises that can happen, and has given us signs that point to that being the very nature of God's activity. And God invites us to be part of that new-life creating activity.

So wherever you are in this story – questioning where is God and in grief over how things are going...or having witnessed first-hand God's miraculous presence in your life... don't forget that we are each invited to be a part of God's presence in the lives of others.

And that's a pretty good thought for us to live with these days.

Let's pray... (I invite you to respond to "Hear us, O God" with "Your Mercy is Great.")

Almighty God, we are these days reminded us of our frailty. We have subdued much of the earth with our innovation and creative acts, but we are reminded in this moment how frail and powerless we really are. So we repent of our self-sufficiency and arrogance. Like your Son, we weep and rage at sickness and death. And yet we know that it was Jesus who showed us again and again that you overcome all things, and promise new life in all times and places. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

As we endure this new normal in our lives, we pray earnestly for the heroic medical doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who are putting their lives on the line for their neighbors. We pray for the scientists, disease experts, and epidemiologists who are working feverishly on vaccines and testing mechanisms. Lord, we thank you for gifting them with knowledge and wisdom we don't have. We pray for their endurance, for breakthroughs, and for resources. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God, we know that life goes on, and we have concerns even beyond this health crisis. God of insight, bring peace to all people and nations. Anoint leaders who seek goodness, righteousness, and truth on behalf of all. Frustrate the efforts of those who would seek to cause violence or terror. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

As spring approaches, O Lord, empower us to care for the land and all living things that dwell in it and beneath it. Provide rich soil for crops to grow. Bring rain to lands suffering drought. Protect hills and shorelines from damage caused by erosion. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We miss the people we gather with so regularly, O God – the people in our church on Sunday, in gatherings and work and school and social events. We miss each other. Help us to find ways to stay connected, to give the support and reassurance that physical presence has always done for us. Give us joy in anticipation of those things happening again, and not to ever lose sight of how precious our relationships with others are! Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Hear the prayers we carry in our hearts for those who are sick, those who face the end of life for themselves or loved ones, for those loved ones who are always with us. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

All these things, and all other things you see that we need, Almighty God, we ask in the name of Jesus whose Spirit remains with us always.

Amen.

