

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 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." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "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." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." 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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, 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. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 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.” Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. John 11:1-45

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is the final Sunday before Palm/Passion Sunday this year. I miss seeing you all face to face. I hope you are all bearing up well in the midst of this trying time when we’re all ordered to stay home to protect each other and ourselves from the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

As we ponder the familiar story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, the current situation of this COVID-19 pandemic certainly heightens our awareness of our own mortality, doesn’t it? At the very beginning of Lent each year, each Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.” Now that we come towards the end of Lent, Jesus shows us how he reacts to mortality (he weeps at the grave of his friend Lazarus), and what he does to it, how he transforms it (he raises Lazarus up from the grave).

Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where he was after hearing Lazarus was sick. Being the resurrection and the life, death is powerless in His presence. When Jesus tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life” he lets her know that resurrection is more than a mere concept. His statement, “I am the resurrection and the life” is 1 among 7 different “I am” statements Jesus makes throughout the Gospel of John. In chapter 6, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” In chapters 8 and 9 he says, “I am the light of the world.” In chapter 10 he says, “I am the door for the sheep.” Later in that same chapter, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” Here, in this chapter 11 he tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” In chapter 14, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” In chapter 15, he says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Those 7 “I am” statements that Jesus makes throughout the Gospel of John underscore His divinity. They echo the name Yahweh – God, the Father gave to Moses when Moses asked God what name he should give the Hebrews for God. As we hear the conversation between Moses and God in Exodus 3:13-14:

“Then Moses said to God, ‘Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they say to me, “What is His name?” what shall I say to them?’ And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’”

God is a God of action. God’s name “I am” is a verb. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” he says he is God in the flesh bringing us all we need to sustain life. He is our staple food. When Jesus says “I am the light of the world,” he says – I am light in a dark, sinful world. I give you wisdom when everything around you looks bleak and empty. When Jesus says, “I am the door for the sheep,” he says I give you safe entry and protect you from intruders and robbers. When Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd, he says I lay down my life for my sheep. No one can snatch my sheep out of my hands. I protect them.

When Jesus says, I am the way, the truth and the life, he says he is the pathway to life eternal with our heavenly father. He's our GPS, if you will. When Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches" he says he is the heart that pumps the blood through us and we are the vessels of the church. Today, in our Gospel lesson, when Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" he says what Paul would later say of Jesus – "Death has no dominion over him." Jesus has destroyed death. We know, in this last sign in the Gospel of John that identifies Jesus as the Messiah that no amount of darkness, opposition or betrayal will hinder Jesus' march to the cross. Yes, the tears of his dear friends Martha and Mary, and yes, the tears of the crowd move Jesus to tears himself. It may be the very briefest of verses in the Bible, but it's all one of the deepest. In the midst of the crowd jeering "could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying" Jesus resolutely gives the command to take away the stone. Then, he prays out loud for all to hear, thanking His Father for having heard him. Most importantly, he says he's praying out loud for all to hear so that when His prayer is fulfilled, those who hear Him may believe His Father sent Him.

It's rather amazing how very poignant this series of lessons from John's Gospel that are taking us up to Palm & Passion Sunday next week are in light of the current state of high alert everyone is living under. Not since September 11th 2001 have we lived through such a time when our collective health and safety seemed to be so fragile. I remember, even before that tragic day, some time back in the late 90s when I was finishing seminary, I was having a conversation with my pastor and his wife. Even back then we were sensing and lamenting the diminishing role the church seemed to have in people's life. I remember remarking how soft-in-the-middle the U.S. was getting to be. While I wasn't wishing some crisis would befall us – not by a longshot, I did remark that I heard about

how World War 2 pulled our country and the allied forces together for a unified purpose to beat the scourge of Nazism. That period also produced some of the giants of the faith, great theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr. Great apologists like C.S. Lewis. The war also drove so many people to their places of worship to seek peace and solace that the war-torn world simply could not give. We look back on that generation as our greatest generation. As great as they were, and as heroic as they were, some say they spawned, in the baby boomers, the most entitled and most self-centered generation in the baby boomers. I've heard some baby boomers say that of their own generation. Never mind my generation (the Gen-Xers) and then the millennials. If anything, we're even more spoiled and narcissistic than the baby boomers. Gen-Xers are fond of calling millennials "snowflakes." Anyway, I don't mention these things to spark a generational war. I just think repentance requires that we all take a good look at ourselves. What better time than a global pandemic to do just that?

It was also helpful to hear Pastor Bob Abrams say at my installation that percentage-wise, our worship attendance was about the same at the time of the American Revolution as it is now. Oddly enough, that gives me hope. Recently on Facebook, Pastor Abrams invited people to feel free to message him with prayers he might pray for them. He said he would keep it confidential. This is what I sent him:

You're probably already doing this, but my prayer request is sort of simple. I just need you to join me in praying our God in Christ will bless the positive momentum St. John, Trinity and I were building before COVID-19 came on the scene. That our congregations, and all others in the synod, may somehow come out of this experience stronger for it. You and Bishop Dillahunt already know how long I waited for this call and how long the congregations waited to find someone to call.

I appreciate the offer of confidentiality, but I think this is a prayer many pastors would gladly share so this one doesn't NEED to be confidential. 😊

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020 John 11:1-45 The Raising of Lazarus

...and since the latter half of this lesson is a lesson I so often share at funerals, I think it's fitting to close my sermon on it with the following prayer which comes from the list of prayers we often pray at funerals. We pray this prayer because we believe in the power of Jesus to sustain us, to be our light in an often dark world, to protect us from harm, to lay down his life for us, to raise us from death, to take us to the Father, and to be the very heart of our life together and, like the heart, pump life into us, the veins of His church. Ultimately, we pray this prayer because, like Martha and Mary, we need Jesus to help us believe His promises. And so we ask our Lord Jesus to

“Help us, we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting.”

Amen!