

March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent

John 11:1-44

“If You Had Been Here”

1. I always knew deep in my heart that I would not be able to get back home in time before mom or dad died.
  - a. Living in the States for so many years, and with my elderly folks living in Mexico, it seemed like a real possibility.
    - i. There were a couple of close calls with illnesses or surgeries they had.
    - ii. I'd fly home, and spend a week with them as they recovered. That felt good.
    - iii. But indeed when they died, it was so sudden, that I couldn't have gotten there.
  - b. Thinking about all of this had stemmed from a story dad once told me
    - i. Dad was in school out of state when he got a telegram about his mom being on her deathbed.
    - ii. By the time his train and bus journey got him home, he arrived only to learn his mom had died only a few hours earlier.
2. In our Gospel passage, Mary and Martha grieved because of the death of their brother but also because Jesus had not been able to get there in time.
  - a. It is a poignant, very human story of family and friendship relationships
    - i. We can feel how much the sisters loved Jesus and how sure they both were that, if Jesus had gotten there in time, he could have healed Lazarus
    - ii. They were in pain. Jesus got emotional and wept from grief
    - iii. But as a reader it hurts to watch this unfold when we KNOW Jesus stalled.
    - iv. It is so puzzling to read Jesus' response to the news that Lazarus was ill, and even saying that it would not lead to death – only then to say: oh yeah, he's dead but just you wait...
    - v. When Mary and Martha came out to see Jesus as he approached, they're overcome, they both say “If you had been here, he would not have died.”
    - vi. Which, chances are, it is true.
    - vii. But then Jesus tells them things which are theologically true, though perhaps hard to hear:
      1. Your brother will rise again. (as in the final resurrection?)
      2. 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. (I believe you but I don't understand)
    - viii. Even the crowd gets in the action, thinking – he's a healer, why didn't he keep him from dying?
    - ix. This sets up the biggest divine sign Jesus performs in the gospels, as well as one of his most human moments.
      1. Prior to this, his biggest miracle was healing someone blind from birth
      2. With tears still in his eyes Jesus commands the dead man to walk out of the tomb, and he commands the crowd to unbind him and set him free
      3. You may not be surprised to learn many who were there believed in Jesus because of this, and some were threatened and plotted to kill him.

- b. Brian Peterson, a Lutheran seminary professor writes: “Jesus is the place where death ends and life begins. We, like Martha, believe and yet still struggle to grasp what this means. With Martha we confess what we cannot fully comprehend. From Jesus we hear the word of life which calls us to confront the stinking places of death and decay with hope.” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-raises-lazarus/commentary-on-john-111-44-3>
- 3. That’s how we start Lent this year, with a miracle of new life, and the threat of death
  - a. Lent is personal: a season to pray and confess the sin which weighs us down
    - i. We know we fall short of what God intends for us
    - ii. We see our spiritual frailty, but we lean on the spiritual strength God gives us
  - b. Lent is relational: a season to act as we look at the sin that weighs our community down
    - i. We are not in isolation, and we see the impact of systemic poverty on our neighbors who are food-insecure, and unhoused, as Kelly Daugherty will share
    - ii. And so we act, not just to feed and shelter, but to challenge the systems which invisibly perpetuate those conditions (and we are called to face our own complicity)
  - c. Throughout this Lent, and really throughout our life, there will be times when we will not be there in time
    - i. We will be too late to prevent the pain or anguish of a broken world
    - ii. And we will think that God has also not gotten here in time when we see war and destruction, racism and transphobia, poverty and pain.
    - iii. But the challenge of our faith is to ponder how God acts, often seemingly much too late, how God ushers in life from the places of death, bringing us out of these tombs and demanding that we be unbound and set free
  - d. In that sense, then, it may not be possible to know when late is “too late”
    - i. We may echo the anguish of Mary and Martha “If only you had been here...”
    - ii. But our Lent journey is leading us to a Friday afternoon when the Jesus we love and follow is killed, cowardly executed by the state.
    - iii. If only God had been there...
    - iv. Though we know God was there, and we know Easter cannot happen without that excruciating Friday.
- 4. The tension of that last week is what will guide us in worship for these six Sundays in Lent.
  - a. Jesus’ Last Week will remind us of what weighs us down and what weighs down humanity
  - b. But that Last Week will also remind us that when we think it’s too late, incredibly it is not
  - c. That doesn’t remove the pain and anguish (wished that it did!) but instead it highlights the relationship which we seek to have with God, and the relationship we have with one another
- 5. Beloved, as we enter Lent together, we do so feeling the pain of when it seems God is just simply too late, when it feels like God got sidetracked and the world has fallen apart in God’s delayed appearance. But we hold that pain in tension with the words of Jesus, who says “I am the resurrection and the life.” May we hang on to each other and channel God’s power of new life, of healing and justice, in this in-between time.

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-raises-lazarus/commentary-on-john-111-44-3>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-day/commentary-on-john-1132-44-3>

Reflection Questions :

1. Share a time when you felt God was absent (or was too late in responding to your prayers).
2. How would you describe the emotional roller coaster Mary and Martha were in throughout this story (John 11:1-44)?
3. What is one way in this Lent when you can be present with people who are suffering?