

Staying Joyful in a Pandemic

March 29, 2020

**The holy Gospel according to St. John.
Glory to you Lord.**

John 11:1-6, 17-44

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom **you love** is ill." 4 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." 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was...

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

heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him ON THE ROAD, BUT Mary stayed at home. 21

Martha said to Jesus, **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.** 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” 23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24 Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, **“I am** the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”
(THIS IS THE CONFESSION OF ST. MARTHA)

28 When she MARTHA had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when MARY heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 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. 32 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.**” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 **Jesus began to weep.** 36 So the Jews said, “**See how he loved him!**” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, (the sister of the dead man), **INTERVENED** said to him, “UM Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 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.” 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 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.”

The gospel of our Lord.
Praise to you O Christ.

Sermon

Grace to you in peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is Bishop Mike coming to you on the fifth Sunday of Lent 2020. Wow, what a weird Lent we are having my friends. I am deeply moved by how you've been adjusting and adapting at this challenging moment.

I don't know what you thought you were giving up for a Lent, but I bet it wasn't all this.

I gave up alcohol and sweets for Lent. That is so over. Instead I'm giving up human interaction, eating out with friends, and toilet paper.

Someone joked this week, we didn't know we'd be giving up church for Lent. Here's some good news: you're not! This is not the church. You are the church. We are the church, wherever two or three are gathered...

These have been some pretty hard, anxiety-filled days. What have you been doing to maintain your joy? How do you keep your spirit up when life gets turned upside down on you? How do you stay hopeful and JOYFUL? I like to take our appointed Scripture reading and see what it might have to say to us about what we are going through. I opened my Bible to the gospel reading appointed for the fifth Sunday Lent for Year 1 of the Revised Common Lectionary, and there was John 11 staring me in the face.

Lazarus got ill.

We don't know what he got. Maybe a virus. We don't know. But he's sick and his sisters are scared. It's natural to be scared. Normal. Will he be okay? Will he die? We have the same question today do we not? Will we have to quarantine? Will I get sick? Will those I love get sick? Will I have work? Will I have money? Will I have enough food? Enough toilet paper?

Corona virus is the enemy, but so is fear. How do we keep fear and anxiety at bay? We'll get to that. Let's stay on the story.

So Lazarus' worried sisters sent word to Jesus: "Lord, he whom **you love** is ill."

Later on in John's gospel, it talks about the "disciple who Jesus loved." Everybody thinks it's John, but maybe it's Lazarus.

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." So, though **Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus**, (there it is again) after hearing that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two more days where he was...

Critical error? **This illness does not lead to death**. It's hard to know, right? When I first heard about this coronavirus, I thought it would blow over. Boy was I wrong. A few years ago, H1N1 took 12,000 US lives over 18 months. Certainly this won't rise to that level, I thought. We're at what? Nearly 1,000 US deaths in just one month. Now we're just trying to keep the surge down, so hospitals won't get overwhelmed.

This illness won't lead to death. He'll be fine...

But here's another read. Jesus doesn't race around like a chicken with his head cut off, trying to meet everyone's needs. These people need me here, but Mary and Martha need me there, what do I do? Some leaders try to be a quivering mass of availability. Maybe there's a lesson here:

Pace yourself. Even in a crisis. Especially in a crisis. If you go, go, go, you will certainly crash.

- Don't camp out on the news. 30 minutes a day watching. 60 minute reading. No more.
- Don't camp out on social media.
- If you're working, set a timer for 90 minutes and then go for a walk. Smell the flowers. Inhale the pollen. Suffer from allergies like the rest of us.
- Get enough sleep.
- Take a sabbath day. Six days shall you labor. You need your day off now more than ever.
- Jesus constantly stole away for rest and prayer. Follow Jesus.

Back to our story. Now Jesus arrived, Lazarus was dead. In fact, he'd already been dead for **four days**. The family was not just in grief, they were in the **anger stage** of grief. Martha, over-functioning Martha, didn't even wait for a Jesus to arrive. She went out and met

him on the road before he even got there. **“Lord, IF you had been there, my brother would not have died.”**

OUCH. It’s easy when we are hurting, when things are hard to blame others. We sent word and you didn’t bother to come? This is like the family calling for the pastor to be with their loved one on the deathbed, and the pastor just doesn’t get around to it. And the patient dies. No healing oil. No commendation of the dying. I don’t want to face that family.

Jesus says, “I am the resurrection.” “I know, I know,” says Martha. “He will rise again on the last day. Whatever.” Jesus says “No, I AM (wink, wink) I AM the resurrection.”

Then Martha went home and sent Mary our to meet Jesus. And what are the first words out of her mouth? **“If you had been her my brother would not have died!”** Poor Jesus. He’s getting pummeled here. And then Mary burst into tears. And this is what got him. A lot of men don’t know what to do when a woman cries. “Ah, c’mon now. Don’t do that.”

But that's not what Jesus does. It says when he saw her crying, he was greatly disturbed, in his spirit, and deeply moved. I imagine it was like being punched in the gut. And Jesus began to cry. Some versions just say, "Jesus wept." Some say this is the shortest verse in the Bible, but it has big impact.

Even Jesus, the resurrection and the life, wept at the death of Lazarus and at the grief of his sisters. Our faith in God and hope of the resurrection does not exempt us from grief.

When people are overwhelmed, disturbed, grieving, don't tell people not to cry, or have faith, just because you're uncomfortable. Enter into their discomfort. **Listen to them. Cry with them.** Hug them and tell them to let it all out. (Wait. No hugs today. Virtual hug.) Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Compassion does not always mean fixing things. There are some things you can't fix.

This is a time to listen to one another and enter into one another's discomfort. And when you do, something will happen inside you. Bearing one another's burdens will increase your joy. You will feel more connected, less alone. Jesus wept. It's okay for you to weep too.

Now when those around saw Jesus crying too, some said, “**See how he loved him!**” There it is again. This is the third time John has told us how much a Jesus loves Lazarus. But others sneered at him, “Could not he who gave sight to the blind have healed his friend?”

When you weep with those who weep, when you show vulnerability, some will be drawn to you and bond with you. Others will laugh at your weakness. Don't let it get to you. **Disregard the taunting of the unkind.** The yelling always comes from the shallow end of the pool.

So Jesus went to the tomb. When he arrived, he prayed. “Thank you for hearing me, for the sake of all gathered here...”

He prayed because he knows the power in prayer, not just to heal out there, but also to heal in here. Prayer dispels fear. Philippians 4:6-7 says,

*Have no **anxiety** about anything, but in everything by **prayer** and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the **peace** of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your **minds** in Christ Jesus.*

It's interesting that Paul connects prayer with anxiety. Prayer dispels anxiety. It will give you peace of mind. It will also give you strength. Isaiah 40:29-31 says,

*29 [God] gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.*

*30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;*

*31 but **those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,***

*they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

When your tired, anxious, afraid: pause and pray. Pray like your life depends on it.

And after he prayed, Jesus swept into action. He boldly called Lazarus out from the tomb. And Lazarus comes out like a mummy, still wrapped up in strips of cloth. Probably a bit dazed, and perhaps unhappy. You brought me back from paradise, to this vale of tears, so I can die again?

I want to make a connection to another Lazarus. This story is in John, but remember in Luke Jesus tells the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus? Poor Lazarus to eat the scraps from the rich man's table. Then they both die in the tables are turned, and the rich man wants Abraham to warn his family to care for the poor so they won't meet the same fate. Abraham says, they have the Law and the Prophets. Anybody can read the Bible and see you're supposed to care for those in need. The rich man says, yeah, but if someone were to rise from the dead, then they might believe. Abraham says, "even if someone were to rise from the dead, they would not believe."

It strikes me as more than just coincidence that John has a story about a man maybe Lazarus rising from the dead. Someone to remind us to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable. Someone to remind us to not lose hope, to remind us to trust God in life and in death, to remind you that God loves you with an everlasting love that is stronger than the grave.

So how do you stay joyful in a pandemic? It's all right there in John 11. Did you hear it?

1. Pace yourself like Jesus. You're not quivering mass of availability.
2. Take your sabbath. If Jesus needed rest, you will too.
3. Be slow to anger. When your frightened or hurting, be slow to blame others.
4. Listen to one another. Weep with those who weep. Show compassion and vulnerability.
5. Disregard the taunting from the shallow end of the pool.
6. Pray. Wait on the Lord.
7. Respond to the need. Take action.
8. Trust God, in life and in death. In joy and in sorrow.