

Jordan Station United Church

March 29, 2020

Lent 5 – Week 3 of Social Distancing

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Sermon: "Lazarus is raised, NOT resurrected!"

(John 11:1-45)

As Holy Week quickly approaches, I had thought that this would be the year that Lent didn't really happen. Perhaps 2020 shall be known as Lentless Lent. Lent Light. Or maybe...just maybe, it is the complete opposite? Maybe, it is the Relentless Lent or even the best Lent Ever we have every experience. If Lent is a time to go without. To separate ourselves from the trappings of life. To look deep at our lives and our behaviours. To be silent and still in the presence of God, then 2020 is our year! I think for the season of Lent in 2020 we are killing it! On Ash Wednesday the scriptures called us to turn away from sin and turn back to God. I think a truly miraculous thing has happened. In the past two weeks, God has called us to respond and we have; in incredible and amazing ways.

It is significant that the story of Lazarus, which is unique to the Gospel of John, is the Gospel reading for this the last Sunday in Lent. It is significant that is being told the Sunday immediately preceding Palm/Passion Sunday. For the Gospel of Mark and Luke, the cleansing of the temple is the impetus for the plot to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47-48). But, in the Gospel of John, the temple scene is moved to the beginning of the Gospel, immediately following the Wedding at Cana, and it is today's story of the raising of Lazarus to life that incites the plot for Jesus' arrest and death (11:53, 57).

As the Moderator read today, in John 11:46-57, the chief priests and the Pharisees are told what Jesus did and "from that day on they planned to put him to death." Moreover, the chief priests want to get rid of the evidence as well, and plan to put Lazarus to death "since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (12:9-11). It is Jesus' very claim, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25) that provokes his death.

Karoline Lewis writes that "the raising of Lazarus is the last of Jesus' "signs" in the Gospel of John. Chapter 12 functions as a bridge chapter before the narrative halts in time for Jesus' last meal and words to his disciples (chapters 13-17). The actual raising of Lazarus is narrated in only two verses (11:43-44). The events, discussion, and details *prior* to the main event receive the bulk of the narrative space.

This is not to say that the raising of Lazarus is not important. The narrative elements that set up Lazarus coming out of the tomb are significant. They contribute both to the narrative suspense and to the extraordinary final scene of Lazarus, dead man walking. We are told that the tomb was a cave and that there was a stone against it. Lazarus has been dead for four days. Since Jewish belief held that the soul left the body after three days, just in case we are wondering, Lazarus is *really* dead. And, he is going to smell. Jesus then pauses to pray and this prayer is more than demonstrative. Note what Jesus highlights in his prayer—the act of hearing (11:41-42). Jesus thanks God for hearing him, and how is Lazarus

raised? By hearing Jesus. Like the sheep that recognize the voice of the shepherd who calls them by name (10:3), Lazarus hears his name being called, he recognizes the voice of the shepherd (Jesus), and the *dead man* comes out, because only the shepherd can lead his sheep out. Only Jesus can lead us. Only Jesus can raise us up.

Again, we should ask, why does Jesus need to talk about the raising of Lazarus prior to doing it? Is it because the sign would be easily misunderstood, even by us? When we think about the raising of Lazarus, do we place our focus on "I am the resurrection" and not remember that Jesus also says "I am the life?" Indeed, this is exactly what Martha thinks. Notice her dialogue with Jesus in 11:21-27. When Jesus says to her, "your brother will rise again," she hears only the promise of a future resurrection, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (11:24). And Jesus seems to correct this misunderstanding, "I am the resurrection *and* the life." But Jesus, we might ask, what is the difference?"

There is a big difference between being raised and being resurrected. As Christians, we tend to focus on the grand nature of the resurrection and as we edge closer to Holy Week and Easter some are already making the connections between Jesus' resurrection and our being released from our homes. That our stay at home punishment and isolation could somehow mirror Jesus' journey during holy week.

We tend to focus on the resurrection that we situate for ourselves as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. But what might it mean that Jesus is the resurrection *and* the life? That we are raised to life, not as a notion of future salvation but to life right now, right here, with Jesus?

Lewis goes on to say that "for Lazarus, the Gospel does not describe his future with Jesus, but his present. In chapter 12, the anointing of Jesus takes place at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. We are told that Martha served, Mary anoints Jesus, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead (12:1, 9, 17) "was one of those at the table with him." The raising of Lazarus also gives him *new life* with Jesus. This new life is leaning on the breast of Jesus (13:23), reclining at the table with him, sharing food and fellowship (13:28). New life in Jesus is this intimacy, this closeness, this dwelling, lying on the chest of Jesus. It is here and now, because for the Gospel of John, it is not just the death of Jesus but the *life* of Jesus that brings about salvation. For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, through which "we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16).") When we are raised, we are giving new life right here and right now.

I read the following on Facebook yesterday and I thought it was quite profound. I have added my own thoughts and give thanks to whomever wrote it to begin with. I don't know if you agree, but an incredible transformation has taken place in Canada over the past two weeks. A complete reversal and reordering of everything that we have known before. Suddenly the price of gasoline has come down, pollution has been seriously reduced, people suddenly have more time - so much time that they do not know what to do with it. Parents are spending time with their kids as a family, work is no longer a priority, and neither is traveling or after school activities or social events. When I spoke to one of my church kids this week and asked her what the best part of being safe at home was, she responded by saying that Mommy and Daddy have to stay home too. They can't go on vacation and leave them home with a babysitter. Now don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with taking time together as adults, parents and partners but it is lovely to

have the TIME we have always yearned for to spend time together. It is lovely for our children to have this time.

Other amazing things are happening. Suddenly, we silently see within ourselves and understand the value of the words; solidarity, love, strength, empathy and faith. In an instant we realized that we are all in the same boat; rich or poor. That the supermarket shelves are empty and the hospitals are full. New cars and old cars stand in the garages, simply because nobody can go anywhere. Empty streets, less pollution and clean air as mother earth takes a deep breath and smiles with hope.

Humans are called to return to their roots, realizing that with or without money, power and influence, the important thing is survival, and survival for all. Today, health is the main focus for everyone. How can we keep ourselves, our families, our neighbours and essential workers safe? Suddenly the world is asking how can we keep our retail workers safe? Those that earn the least among us? What does it mean to live in a society when vulnerable people are secure? It has taken less than a month for the universe to establish the social equity that was said to be impossible. Has Capitalism been reordered in just a couple of months? We have moved from individualism to having a holistic view on what is needed by all and not just a select few. As Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury said this week that even the people you never imagined would be talking about this are looking at a universal basic income as the world wide solution to this pandemic and the global impact it will have. "The sacred cows of Capitalism are going to be slaughtered," he said. A system of universal basic income would give the maximum security to the people who most need it. The people who by no fault of their own are now suddenly unemployed. It comes down to the understanding that my well being is inexplicably tied to the well being of all of our fellow human beings. (Rowan's words have been drawn from an interview with the BBC Nightly News)

The Coronavirus is teaching us that:

- our best protection is faith
- our best refuge if we have one is our home
- our best company is the people we live with
- our time is: right now, in this moment

Mother Earth, God, our Politicians, our friends and our family are calling us to simply stop, to shelter in place. Today I join the many voices calling you to stay home. The message is clear. We must rest and wait. There is no better message for this final week of lent than to follow the call to stay in place. We have come this far; we can make it another week or two before we celebrate with a parade. Staying home means just that. Unless you need medical attention or are an essential worker then please stay home. That means you don't go to a friend's home, you don't go to the store. You just stay home. The sooner we all stay in place, the sooner we can get on this pandemic under control.

The time is now to get back to basics. To focus on taking a deep and cleansing breathe. To remember that we have an amazing God who can lead us to the light. Jesus is indeed the light of the world and we will rise my friends. It will happen eventually but these things can not be rushed. Now is the time to rest. Remember how busy you used to be. Remember when you use to say if only, I had more time. Well now is the time. The time to love and protect others. To care for the least among us and humanity as a whole instead of just ourselves. To care for the front-line workers in our medical field and the food industry by staying home.

To value our seniors, our children and all those who are sick or afraid by reduction the chance of transmission. Now is the time to demonstrate how we are the church in the world.

It was a tough week for me and all clergy across the province when it became clear that we would not be designated as an essential service. It was tough to hear that our churches, our beloved buildings would indeed close and we too must heed the call and stay home. As our Regional Director said very clearly, "The best things ministers can do right now is to stay home and stay healthy." But that doesn't mean that being a church community has stopped. As your Minister, I am doing everything I can to help us stay connected. To find new ways to Worship together. New ways to sing together, meet together and pray together. We will rise again my friends. It may not be in time to be physically present for the resurrection of Jesus Christ but we will rise in other ways.

I have already witnessed the tremendous power of this congregation and none of it had anything to do with our church building. I have witnessed you checking in with one another by telephone, email and Facebook. I have witnessed the sharing of food and flowers to those in need. I have witnessed how you have embraced technology to stay connected. It is times like this when we have to face the things, we are afraid of. I have witnessed the continuing power of prayer. So today, we are called to pray, to stay home, to wash our hands and to save lives. May God be with us all. Amen