

Sermon: When Jesus' Friend Died**Scripture: John 11:1-45****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: March 26, 2023**

The reality of death colors our life, whether consciously or unconsciously, our existence is shot through with the threat of non-existence, the presence of those we love marked by the reality of an eventual absence, one way or another. It's always there, the reality of death, and has its impact upon us to greater and lesser extents, but always an impact, whether we bring it to mind or not. What church give us a chance to do and what the season of Lent in particular offers us is to bring death to mind on our own terms and more importantly on God's terms, which are terms of love.

We began Lent with the familiar Ash Wednesday phrase – “from dust you have come to dust you shall return” – and we remember that we are creatures of the earth and the earthen processes of birth, life, decay and death are ours as well. But that need not be a terrifying or despairing reality to consider because we hold with that the belief that our lives and in fact all life, is not merely random acts of chaotic comings and goings but called forth by a Divine Creator who creates out of love and is drawing all creation back into the arms of love. That's what our religious tradition, our Christian faith, teaches and testifies to. We are free of course to wonder if that's the truth, to doubt it and question the testimony that comes to us from across the ages, but there are times when it's just best to lean into it and trust what our great tradition proclaims about death, to listen to the sacred stories and hear what they have to teach us.

This morning Cindy and Nick have read for us a story all about death that precedes Jesus's own journey to his death and the story we heard can teach us of how death is seen through the eyes of the divine. So let's consider:

The first thing to notice in the story of the death of Lazarus is the collective buzz that surrounds Lazarus' illness and his death. This is the effect that death and dying has... it activates the collective, the people surrounding the one they care about with concern and conversation, care and prayer, activity and connection. "Lord, Lazarus is very ill", the word goes out from all those surrounding Lazarus who love and care about him, his sisters, the town, and the disciples are aware and talking about it and gathering. It's almost like the dying process, the portent of coming loss, initiates a gathering of community to fill in the chasm that's about to open. Our prayer list and the prayers we make on behalf of others in such times is a part of that gathering to fill the gap. There's actually nothing like dying and death to create this gathering force of love, is there?

I'm experiencing this right now. I thank you for your prayers for my father whose life among us, we think, is waning. And I imagine many of you know what I mean when I say that in the midst of the sadness of it all there is this beautiful, poignant and meaningful coming together that is happening in all our extended family and friends, over the fading presence and life of my father, this kind of rushing in of PRESENCE in the face of what we know will be absence.

Have you experienced this? It's what is built into this life by a good God, that death has this effect. Taylor Tresselt knows this and Nick Wankowicz and Branda Wilhoite and Jane Ring Frank and Ted Lamson, among the more recent of our community to know this. Isn't it amazing how death, as tragic and sad as it is, is also a great revealer of love? In facing my father's death I'm suddenly tenderly

aware of my love for him... but not just for him but for my mother and my wife and my daughters, my sisters and my brother and my nephews and for you..., love flooding into the gaps and filling it all up. That's something of an effect of death, which reveals how deeply and thoroughly God's grace is built into the processes of this world even unto death itself.

Our God-revealer Jesus is called forth at Lazarus' terminal illness and he is so revered as a healer and conveyor of God's grace at this point in his public life that his friends – Martha and Mary and the disciples - assume that his presence there will cancel the terminal nature of Lazarus' illness and bring him new life. And we still pray to him today in situations of dire need for his healing presence and power. Sometimes it seems as though miracles occur and he's come to our aid, but oftentimes what we have been dreading and preparing for, death itself does arrive, as it did in the story of Lazarus. The end comes, as we feared. Jesus wasn't there to heal him and keep him from dying and the gathered community in love lifts up their wails and cries of grief at the loss of the one they love.

When Jesus finally does come upon the scene we read the shortest scripture passage in all the Bible that confirms everywhere who have to memorize a Bible passage try and make the one they memorize and that is John chapter 11 verse 35 – "Jesus wept."

Our Great Example, The God-Revealer, Jesus the Christ, came upon the death of his good friend Lazarus and was not stoically unemotional, he did not laugh in the face of death, he did not have a tough upper lip because of the promise of life after death.

He wept.

It's a powerful thing to say that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, and to then hear - he wept at the death of a friend. That love is such, that even in the heart of God it has the capacity to hurt, to take the divine breath away. And if God weeps who are we not to. And if God weeps then we are not alone, never alone in our grief. You might have heard about the great pastor and peace activist William Sloane Coffin's eulogy for his son who died in a car accident when he said:

The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.

Jesus wept and for all who have lost one we love, which is or will be all of us one day, the journey through the landscape of loss and grief is what we must traverse but God is there in that wilderness cause Jesus walked that road too and with him we are not alone.

In the emotions of these last few weeks for me I've had two dreams that aren't all that hard to interpret, kind of knock ya over the head as grief dreams. One is of me in the ocean surf and friends on the beach calling to me and a wave comes and knocks me down and I get up and take a breath and just then another comes and I scramble to the surface only for another crash over me until I wake up gasping. And the other dream is of a single giant wave towering above me and I feel myself being sucked out in the undertow of that giant wave and it doesn't crash on me but the riptide of it draws me out into the ocean and when I finally surface to take a breath I realize I'm far far from shore with debris floating around me. I find a red and white surfboard that I grab ahold of to paddle my way back to shore. How are those for a good images for grief?!

We naturally orient our lives around what we assume is stable and constant and the loves in our lives are one of those constants and so necessarily dis-orientation comes with their dying. It came to Jesus in the death of his friend Lazarus and the wave of grief, the ocean of grief overcame Jesus who also knew the unmooring that can happen with the stark glimpse of how ephemeral it all is, many feel especially early on that they'll never catch their breath in that new land where the one we oriented our lives around or with is suddenly absent... but we do, don't we, we come to know ourselves in this life differently.

But Jesus' emotions in the story don't stop with his weeping. In verse 38 it speaks of him coming to the tomb "moved deeply", but most scholars agree that the best way of translating the Greek word is "angry", then Jesus moved with anger came to the tomb. This seems so incongruous with 2 verses before Jesus weeping and with the tenderness of his love and care for Lazarus and Mary and Martha and so translators adjust it to "deeply moved". But there's something not to be missed with Jesus' anger. Lazarus was a young man, not a naturally old man whose time had come and so especially in tragedies of suicide or accidents or illnesses, grief also has edges of or straight up anger at what is lost, that there's something in the final analysis that says this is not ok, actually, that in this world death rends from us those we love.

And our scriptures suggest that clearly - that death was not what was intended ultimately by God for God's beloved creation. One way it's described in narrative form in Genesis is that death came into the world because the fall had initiated struggle, suffering, division and violence and death was given to ensure that such things would come to an end. But of course along with that comes an end to the goodness that this life blesses us with. And so we witness in Jesus'

approach to the tomb, after he's wept, this wave of anger that overcomes him at the reality of death for taking away the one he loved, at death for being necessary in this life.

But it's Jesus after all, so he can call Lazarus out of the tomb and bring him back to life for the time being... which is only a stop gap measure because still Lazarus and Martha and Mary and us all will find our lives ending in death. So Jesus carries on not as a dominator of death, taking back what was taken from him but rather subjects himself to it, and thereby willing brings love through that veil and to unravel death from the inside so that ultimately it does not accomplish what death seems to want to accomplish which is to separate us and sever us from the loves that makes life precious. Love is far too powerful to be severed at death and so the promise comes that the collective that was summoned in dying and death is gathered after death as well, called forth by the savior's tender voice – come to me all ye who are heavy laden and I will give you rest and rest is one day offered to all.

And THAT we can lean into and look forward to even as we paddle back to shore through waves of grief knowing that in the face of all that is lost, in the end we and all our loves will be found and our feet will walk securely on the grounds of a new heaven and a new earth, in the promise of Christ, amen.