The Words We Never Want to Hear

A meditation on John 11: 1 – 45

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Virtual Grace Presbyterian Church March 29, 2020

John 11 opens with these words:

*A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (****2****This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.)* ***3****So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.”*

Those are words no one wants to speak, words that no one wants to receive. “The one you love is ill.”

We hear this narrative and it makes us ache for Jesus. Who would want to be the one given the task of delivering painful news to Jesus? We’ve all been there. To have to make that call. To receive that call. This statement makes us a little curious, too. So much we don’t know about Jesus and his friendships. We only have four rather brief descriptions of his years as a prophet, a healer, a miracle worker, a rabbi; we know so little about his life behind the scenes. This one simple sentence speaks volumes: “the one whom you love is ill.” Jesus loved many, many people, but Lazarus? He must have been a true friend. Maybe Lazarus was the one Jesus could go to when he needed to vent a little about the disciples. Maybe Lazarus was the one with whom Jesus could be real, could say anything: doubts, fears, frustrations, hopes. Images come to mind for each of us. The ones I love! “The one whom you love is ill.” Our hearts beat a little faster. Our eyes become damp with tears we don’t want to cry.

Yet this is a reality of our lives. Children fall ill, teenagers, adults of all ages. In this time of COVID-19 we especially dread hearing these words. We know that some experience the virus as being no worse than the flu, but that for others, it is extremely complicated, potentially fatal. We know people who are immunocompromised, who have various health complications that make this pandemic even more frightening. You may be one of those people who lives with this added layer of fear and anxiety.

The gift scripture offers to us today is Lazarus, a story of illness, death and new life; a story for uncertain times and strangely long days. In John’s Gospel, we encounter Jesus performing many signs, what the other gospel writers refer to as “miracles.” John records only seven and he always calls them signs, for they direct our attention to the very nature of Jesus. John offers us these:

* Changing water to wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2: 1 – 11)
* Healing the official’s son (John 4: 46 – 54)
* Healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (Jn 5:1-15)
* Feeding the 5,000 (Jn 6:5-14) This is the version that includes the boy who shares his lunch.
* Walking on water (Jn 6:16-21)
* Healing the man born blind (Jn 9:1-7)
* Raising Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:1-45)

These various signs reveal Jesus’ relationship to creation, his identification with human suffering, and his expression of God’s realm on this earth. With some signs, Jesus, or perhaps John, allows the sign to stand alone. Water to wine. Where’s the long-awaited explanation for that? There are myriad interpretations, but Jesus’ words on this? We don’t know. Water transformed to wine that foreshadows wine transformed to blood? Interpretation through embodiment. Perhaps…

When Jesus does offer an interpretation, it follows the dialogue of those who have witnessed the miracle. The pattern is this: Jesus performs a miracle (sign), witnesses discuss it, Jesus gives an interpretation. The interpretations are always intended to push the community to understand the message within and beyond the sign. After feeding the 5,000, he tells them, “don’t work for food that doesn’t last, but for the food that endures!” After walking on water, Jesus simply says, “I am. Don’t be afraid!” Jesus pushes people to have faith in God, rather than faith in miracles. If our faith is built upon miracles, or the expectation of miracles, our faith will not stand for long*. If you need proof through miraculous healings that God exists, you are walking a dangerous path.* Like one of those rope and wood bridges that sways with the wind. One of those bridges you see in an Indian Jones movie, one misstep, and you will fall to the river below. There will never be enough miracles to sustain a faith like that. As you are celebrating that God intervened to protect one individual from a deadly illness, another equally dear one most certainly will be lost.

There is only one miracle that can be both foundation and building block, and that miracle is Jesus himself. He is miraculous in his forgiveness, miraculous in his compassion, miraculous in his selflessness, miraculous in patience, miraculous in the expanse of his welcome. But even Jesus did not escape suffering, did not escape grief, did not escape persecution, did not escape death.

Faith is powerful, but it is not magical. Faith in God can transform the world, but that faith requires labor more than miracles.

Before Jesus goes to be with Mary and Martha, before he returns to Lazarus to “wake him from sleep,” Jesus tries to help Lazarus’ sisters understand what is happening. Theologian Karoline Lewis explains that with this sign Jesus knows that they will need the explanation before the sign instead of afterwards. Jesus approaches Mary & Martha’s home, but only Martha comes out to meet him.

Beginning with verse 21:

*Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.* ***22****Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.”*

***23****Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”*

***24****Martha replied, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.”*

***25****Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.* ***26****Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

Lewis notes that we should pay attention to what Jesus says here. He goes beyond saying that he is the resurrection; he says, “I am the resurrection ***and*** the life.” Why would Lazarus need both? Why would ***we*** need both? Isn’t resurrection enough?
“Do we too quickly jump,” Lewis asks, “to the security of eternal life, imagining our future residence in heaven (14:2–3) rather than the provision of life in the present?”[[1]](#endnote-1) Yes, we all savor the promise of resurrection, but Jesus reminds us that he brings life into our midst here on earth.

Jesus needs us to understand the significance of Lazarus’ resurrection, so that we also will understand the significance of his own. Jesus’ resurrection is not a one-dimensional promise of eternal life. Jesus’ resurrection is preceded by a life of compassion and righteousness, a life of vulnerability and risk. In the four years leading up to his death, he has angered some, confused others, discouraged some, renewed others. He made enemies as easily and rapidly as he made disciples. In raising Lazarus, Jesus has once again brought attention to himself and solidified the resolve of those who want him removed from their presence.

Lazarus’ story is an essential story for these painful days in which we are living. I hope you will go back and read it and re-read it. Read it in different translations, which is very easy – and free - to do if you have a computer or smart phone. (See below.) Sadness, fear, disappointment, hope, confusion. All these raw emotions are here. What Jesus isn’t experiencing firsthand, he is witnessing on the faces of his friends. Everything we are facing in these days is here – in this story.

Mary and Martha give to Jesus their anger and hope, and even before the miracle is offered, Martha restates her faith. “Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God’s Son, the one who is coming into the world.” Look at Martha, who can profess her faith ***and also*** be concerned that to open the tomb will release a terrible odor. She’s got the both/and. It’s the stink of this world and the fragrance of the next.

Listen to these words of Rev. Dr. Joy Moore of Lutheran Seminary:

*Within this community called Christ-followers, Jesus had cultivated an intimacy that allowed Mary and Martha to expect healing. The disappointment of the delay occurs within the expectation of a response. And even in this moment, they remain faithful. The complexity of emotions is real.*

*And there is the rub. Sometimes disappointment and faith coexist. Martha and Mary do not demand a fix. They continue [to] believe Jesus is the source of their hope. So—the focus of the text is not a pronouncement of survival principles, but signs of God’s faithfulness to restore life in this world permeated with death and destruction. The signs restore our capacity to see God’s faithfulness in the face of disaster.*

*Jesus will venture to the very place his life is most threatened, Jerusalem. There he encounters the very element that most threatens humanity, death. As we see Jesus’ sorrow, may we recognize the regret of God that creation is in agony. See God, seeing us, and grieving that the curse still reigns. For now.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Jesus is the resurrection ***and*** the life. The promise of life to come, the presence of this very real and often painful world in which we live and move and have our being. And Jesus gets it. All of it. How he aches to bring back from the dead everyone we have ever loved. As much as you long for this, he longs even more. And it will be so. But while we are here, on this earth, he needs us to be fully present, fully engaged in all that he taught, all he modeled for us in his brief journey here. In this work we proclaim resurrection every day – every day.

Jesus is the resurrection, the promise of what is to come; Jesus is the life, for each of us in every messy joyful or painful moment. Resurrection and life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-03/sunday-april-10-2011?code=saaRafYQ4aKfPIoluPzL&utm\_campaign=bbaf29fa21-EMAIL\_CAMPAIGN\_2018\_09\_11\_08\_32\_COPY\_08&utm\_medium=email&utm\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\_term=0\_b00cd618da-bbaf29fa21-83882027 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5423>

Free Bible websites – each offer multiple translations:

[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

www.bible.com [↑](#endnote-ref-2)