

Sermon for Lent 5A  
Sunday, March 26, 2023  
“Love leads to life”

Text: John 11:1-45

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We’ve just heard the second longest passage in our lectionary. The longest will be read/chanted next week—the Passion of Jesus Christ according to Matthew. But today’s reading for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent describes a pivotal event leading to the events we will hear about next week on the Sunday of the Passion, also known as Palm Sunday. And so, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent is also known as “Passion Sunday” because it is the beginning of what we call Passiontide, when we begin to direct our attention from our own sin and brokenness to the journey that Jesus the Anointed One will take that will lead to our redemption and salvation. This story of the Raising of Lazarus, which appears only in the Gospel according to John, was the straw that broke the camel’s back for the religious authorities who wanted to be rid of that troublemaker Jesus of Nazareth. It was the event that led Jesus straight into Jerusalem and straight up to Golgotha. But, this story of Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is also a story of incredible love that juxtaposes, places side-by-side the reality of Jesus’ humanity and his divinity.

The relationship Jesus had with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was one of deep friendship and profound love. The Gospels take us into their home more than once. It was Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet while Martha worked frantically to prepare a meal and show their hospitality. It was Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus with oil and wiped them dry with her hair, and Judas Iscariot scolded her for using expensive nard. We can presume that his visit was one of many visits Jesus made to this family. So, I can only imagine the profound anguish Jesus must have felt when he received the news that his dear friend Lazarus was at the point of death. And it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to feel the desperation that Mary and Martha felt when they sent word to Jesus begging for his help. And even though he seems to blow them off at first, clearly he knew what he was about to do; he knew that he was going to demonstrate the mighty power of God and his own divine nature through the dire situation involving Lazarus. Clearly he knew the risks he was taking to his own life in this action, because he was already on the Jews’ hit list. The story tells us that he stayed an extra two days! He wanted to make sure Lazarus was dead dead, not because he was insensitive or didn’t care, but because he wanted to enhance the demonstration of God’s power.

Martha met Jesus on the road where he told her that he is “the resurrection and the life.” Those powerful words we hear at the beginning of our own Burial Office in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Upon hearing this, Martha proclaimed the main point of this story: to proclaim to the world that Jesus *is* the Messiah and that he *is* the key to eternal life. Yet in the midst of this magnificent declaration of Jesus’ divinity, he shows human vulnerability. Jesus wept. John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible. He wept. He

showed himself to be vulnerable, he showed his most human of emotions. And from the depths of his most human self, he launched—he catapulted—his most divine self and resuscitated Lazarus from the dead. This was a foreshadowing of the same act he would do on the cross—from the depths of his humanity he would die, and from that, catapult his divinity onto the world through his resurrection.

This story is also about love. This story shows the profound love that Jesus had for this family, and from that point of love, he went out of his way to perform the greatest of miracles for them: the bringing back of their dear brother and his close friend from the dead. He went out of his way to risk his own safety by returning to Bethany, a town just two miles east of Jerusalem, where the religious authorities were after him. Out of love he met Mary and Martha in their grief, shared in that grief, and then raised Lazarus from the dead. He went there to demonstrate God's awesome power over everything, even death. You can imagine that the news of what happened spread quickly, and in the Gospel according to John, it is the key event that led to Jesus' upcoming arrest, his passion, and his death—yet another event where his divinity will come face-to-face with his humanity and where God's power over death will again be revealed in Jesus' own resurrection.

In today's gospel we see death and life placed next to each other, and we see love running throughout the entire story. In the real world, we see acts of charity and love existing side-by-side with violence, injustice, wars, aggression. It would be so easy to lose faith, or to ask how a God of love could let bad things happen. It would be so easy to feel desperation that God has forgotten the world, or that God is somehow punishing humanity for its wretched sinfulness. But being in relationship with God and knowing Jesus as the Messiah doesn't mean that adversity isn't going to fall upon us sometimes. Even Mary and Martha's being in relationship with Jesus didn't prevent Lazarus from dying. But rather, Jesus met them where they were, in the midst of their distress and grief, and got them through it. Jesus constantly reminds us, in scripture, that knowing him ultimately always leads to life, because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, and whosoever believes in him will never perish, but have everlasting life.

The lessons for today, as we enter Passiontide, are first, to remember that even in the midst of the uncertainty of life, in the midst of its change and chances, God meets us where we are to be present with us to walk alongside us to give us the strength to overcome it. Second, an end may be the transition to a new beginning. It is often necessary for one thing to end in order to allow for a new beginning or for something to progress; it maybe even a second chance. Third, by resuscitating Lazarus, Jesus foreshadows his own resurrection and that even death is not the end, but ultimately leads to life. That's part of our Christian faith. We are not afraid of death, but we acknowledge that it is a part of life, but in death, there is something beyond that. In the next two

weeks, through Passiontide and Holy Week, we will walk the difficult journey with Jesus to the Cross, but he will ultimately show us that through faith there is something better and greater waiting for us. Amen.