

**Olds-Sundre Pastoral Charge of the United Church
Chinook Winds Region At Home Worship
March 22, 2020 Lent 5**

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We gratefully acknowledge that we are on the ancient and traditional lands of The Blackfoot Nation, the people of the Treaty 7, and of Metis Region 3. May we cherish and care for the land and the people, as those who came before us did.

The Lenten Space

As you worship at home, try to create a space for that. It could be as simple as lighting a candle (either flame or battery); or placing a small cross or a symbol that has meaning for you in front of you. If you are alone, perhaps start a journal, as you reflect on the worship experience. Or, perhaps call a friend and share this time with them over the phone. If you are with one or two others, enjoy the conversation that arises...as you practise safe distancing. ☺

OPENING PRAYER

O God, in these days of uncertainty, we can feel like we are in the depths of despair.

We wait and watch for you, O Holy One. Even when life seems like a night that will never end, we wait and watch for you. May we hold on to the truth that in you, there is constant love. And so, we will wait and watch with hope, trusting in that love to enfold us and strengthen us for the way.

Scripture Reading John 11:1-45

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection

Week 5 of Lent; week 2 of social distancing and no community worship. I miss my congregations. These are strange times. Sharing in this way helps, some. It keeps me focusing on the Lenten journey, and that is a helpful thing in the midst of all the chaos that COVID 19 has caused. And so I share with you...

I don't think it's any coincidence that the folk that developed our Lectionary put this story at this point on our Lenten journey...as it does, in so many ways, mirror the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. It's almost a foreshadowing of what lies ahead. And if there's any doubt, remember these verses:

⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."

We know in these words, that Jesus is already at risk. John uses the words "the Jews" to describe those who are angry enough, and threatened enough by Jesus' influence over the people to want him removed from the picture. Those words "the Jews" used in that way, have been responsible for years and years of religious persecution. I would invite you, PLEASE, when you read "the Jews" in these contexts, hear the words "Religious Authorities," for it was a small, but powerful group who wanted Jesus to die.

One of the commentaries I study quite frequently also notes how John's gospel, which has been part of our Lenten journey, offers a great deal of dialogue between Jesus and others – much more so than the other gospels. It's as if the author of John wanted to develop a sense of how much community, people, relationship, mattered to Jesus. (This commentary is working preacher.org).

That's certainly the case in this story – where Jesus is called to come and be with "the one that (he) loves" who is ill.

I can't help but think of the times that I have been called to be with people as they near the end of their lives – as minister, and as family member, as well. And I know that often the "being with" is as much for the care givers, the family, as it is for the beloved who is dying.

And now, in this time that we are living in, community becomes so vitally important. Even though we cannot gather together as a community...we are still community. I feel that in the tone of love in phone calls as I check in with people; I feel it even in the emails I've been receiving; I feel it as I pray for our communities, even while I miss seeing your faces.

Mary and Martha were members of Jesus' community, and I sense that they were close members, friends even. We know that it was to Bethany that Jesus went, to their home, to share stories. It was there that Martha offered her gifts of hospitality, while Mary listened at the feet of Jesus. So when they were in despair, when Lazarus was ill, they called for their friend, Jesus.

Yet this story we heard today is written in such a way that puts Jesus in the place of using this situation to demonstrate something clearly to not only Martha, Mary and Lazarus, but to the community that has gathered to support them. The writer uses this story to show the power of faith and love that is of Jesus.

Jesus doesn't say I WILL BE the resurrection. He says I AM. It's about the here and now of his presence, as God incarnate, with his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; as well as with the

gathered community. And after he calls Lazarus out of the tomb – he calls the gathered community to unbind him and let him go. Jesus calls the community to participate in God’s action of resurrection. Just as others are present in the actions around Jesus’ tomb being found empty, and in recognizing him on the road to Emmaeus, others are invited to be part of the action.

Think about those times when we are suffering and need the support of the wider community. Isn’t that something we who are the church offer well to the community? We do that in times of loss, and we can be that now, in this time of confusions and struggle to know what comes next, in this time of not knowing how things will change from one day to the next.

We are called to be active participants in the transformative, healing power of love. We have a history, as church of doing that. HOW we do that is changing, as we learn to live safely and carefully through these days. But who we are – the hands and feet of Christ – that has not changed.

Let us remember that Jesus didn’t act alone – he called on disciples, friends, to walk with him in his ministry. He calls on us to continue the legacy of his love...to be the resurrected people...here and now. May we take the call to heart, and serve God in love, in whatever ways we can in this time. Even through staying home, we are serving others. Thanks be.

Prayers of the People

Like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, we are loved by you. We give thanks for families, who like them, are used to opening their homes and providing care and companionship to others. Help us to find ways to do that differently in these times.

We pray for each of our homes, that they too may be places of safe sanctuary, where life giving relationships can develop and grow.

We give thanks for the varied gifts of people, and for the many ways gifts are shared – bringing hope to others. Help us to be bearers of the gospel truth wherever we go.

Just as Mary and Martha grieved the loss of Lazarus, there are people in our communities who are experiencing loss of those they love, of employment, of a sense of community as we practise social distancing, and we pray for them.

Lazarus faced illness and death – may those in our midst who are suffering from illness or injury, or awaiting surgery or going through medical tests, know your loving presence, and feel the comfort and care of those who surround them, including those in medical professions.

We add to these, our own personal prayers...O ever-present Spirit of Life, breath new life into us, as continue our Lenten journey. Amen.