

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2020
Living Faith Lutheran Church

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked on us at baptism, as we say:

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God, who is present, who gives life,
who calls into existence the things that do not exist. Amen.

If you were to keep watch over sins, O Lord, who could stand?
Yet with you is forgiveness, and so we confess. *Silence is kept for reflection.*

Gracious God, have mercy on us.

We confess that we have turned away from you, knowingly and unknowingly.
We have wandered from your resurrection life. We have strayed from your love for all people.
Turn us back to you, O God. Give us new hearts and right spirits,
that we may find what is pleasing to you and dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Receive the good news: God turns to us in love.

“I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live,” says our God.

All our sin is forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ,
who is the free and abounding gift of God’s grace for us and for all. Amen.

GATHERING

Gathering Song #612 “Healer of Our Every Ill” (*Refrain is sung at the beginning*)

Refrain: *Healer of our ev’ry ill, light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.*

1. You who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness;
 Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. *Refrain.*
2. In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding,
 give us all your vision, God of love. *Refrain.*
3. Give us strength to love each other, ev’ry sister, ev’ry brother;
 Spirit of all kindness, be our guide. *Refrain.*
4. You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing;
 Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. *Refrain.*

Greeting The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
 and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all.

Kyrie In peace, let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy.
 For the peace from above, and for our salvation,
 let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy.
 For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the church of God
 and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy.
 For this holy house, and for all who offer here their worship and praise,
 let us pray to the Lord. Lord, have mercy.
 Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord. Amen.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death.
Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ
and serve you in righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WORD

Once again, because the Gospel reading is very long, we will use only one of the two other lessons. The First Reading (the story of the Dry Bones coming back to life again) was to serve as a sign to Israel that its exile will one day be over and God will bring them home. Please read both stories either aloud (or in contemplative silence), and thereby “listen” to them. Scripture readings were meant to be spoken and heard (why the Anglican response to the readings is “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church”).

First Reading Ezekiel 37:1-14

Gospel Acclamation for Lent

Let your steadfast love come to us, O Lord.
Save us as you promised; we will trust your word.

Gospel Reading John 11:1-45 *The raising of Lazarus*

Sermon *My re-enactment of this dramatic event as told by Thomas, one of the disciples*

Lent 5a, March 29, 2020

John 11:1–45

I have to admit we were surprised when Peter, James and John told us the news—that Lazarus was very ill and probably at great risk of dying. Our surprise was not only that he was sick but that Jesus, his good friend and the dear friend of Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha—that Jesus wasn’t going to go and see him.

Instead, Jesus told the messenger to let the family know that we were going to stay where we were for at least another day, maybe two, before heading off to Bethany.

I couldn't understand it and so asked him directly. "Master, why are we staying here when your friends need and want you to be with them?"

"I know it must sound awful to you, Thomas" he replied. "But I have my reasons." Having said that, he just went quiet and refused to say any more. His silence on the matter was quite strange.

Two days later, we left. . .but did so without any sense of urgency. It wasn't long before it became obvious to the 12 of us that, at the rate we were walking, it would take us another day to get to Bethany.

So, while on the road, I decided to approach him once more.

"Master," I said, "I know that some in our tradition teach that the spirits of the dead remain near them for three days after their deaths, and that, sometimes, people who die seem to 'wake up' suddenly. Do you agree with those who believe that?"

"Strange things can happen to the dead, Thomas" he replied. "Perhaps that might be the case with Lazarus. We will just have to wait and see."

"But, Lord," I persisted, "even if that is true, which I seriously doubt, we may not make it to Bethany within that three day period. . . depending on when Lazarus dies. . .if he does die," I quickly added. "I mean, if he is still very ill, I know you can and will heal him."

Looking at me with a rather curious look on his face, he simply said "I guess we will just have to wait and see" and then went silent, making it clear that he didn't or wasn't going to talk about this subject any longer.

We spent that night as usual, sleeping out in the open, and approached Bethany on the morning of the fourth day. It was quickly apparent that we were too late.

Even outside of the village, a large crowd of friends were milling around, some of them weeping, some demonstrating their grief by wearing clothes that were ripped, others had ashes on their heads as a sign of their sorrow, and many, even most, of the women were wailing in that high-pitched manner so typical of mourners in this area.

While it was true that some families had to hire women to come and display their grief, that certainly wasn't the case with Martha and Mary. They were much-loved by all of those who lived in Bethany as well as in nearby Jerusalem and the number of people present showed that.

There were even some religious leaders from Jerusalem who, when they saw Jesus and the rest of us with him, rushed over to us, all of them talking at the same time, saying things like "You are too late; you should have come days ago; Lazarus is already dead." "Where were you, Jesus? Why didn't you get here earlier?"

Ignoring the crowd and questions, Jesus walked directly to Martha who had come out of the house after hearing the commotion. Hurrying down the road to where we were, she fell into Jesus' arms, weeping uncontrollably.

Looking around him, he asked where Mary was, Through her tears, Martha told him Mary was in the house, so distraught and weary from her sadness that she could barely get out of bed.

Jesus embraced Martha, holding her close, doing his best to calm her down so he could understand what she was telling him. She was shaking and crying so much, she was almost incomprehensible and inconsolable.

And she had good reason for her distress, and it wasn't just because of the death of their brother either. After all, the lives of these two sisters were about to change drastically. . .and for the worse.

I mean, everybody knew that if women didn't have fathers or husbands or brothers to take care of them, they were in big trouble. How would they provide for themselves? Unless their neighbours took pity on them and hired them to cook or clean or take care of their children, widows or unmarried sisters or daughters had no way of making money except by begging. . .or something worse.

And while Lazarus had been a able provider, making sure that the family home was in good shape and that there was always enough food on the table for the three of them. . . and for friends like us who stopped by to visit on the way to Jerusalem to go to the temple . . .what would happen to them now?

I remember thinking that some of that fear or worry, plus the normal sadness that comes with the shock of the death of her brother, if, indeed, I can call this kind of sadness "normal"--I remember thinking that the reality of a radically different--and frightening future--was also behind Martha's words to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Her profound sorrow and loss, coupled with the knowledge that Jesus was known far and wide as someone who could and did heal the sick, give sight to the blind, make the lame walk and the deaf hear:

knowing that reputation of his added to the very close friendship, even love, that he shared with and received from this family-- all of that and more came through her words that almost sounded accusatory: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

But then she said something that stunned even me, and I'm sure, all of my fellow disciples--words which demonstrated clearly her deep and abiding faith in her friend. . .and her Lord. "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

In other words, she was utterly and completely convinced that whatever Jesus asked God to do that God would grant that prayer, and answer it in a way that could and would change everything.

And when Jesus said that Lazarus would rise again, and she replied that “Yes, he will rise again in the resurrection of the dead on the last day”, he said. . .well, actually, “said” is too mild a word because the words he spoke were incredibly powerful, compelling, stunning:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

It was a moment of high drama and incredible tension. “Do you believe this?”

Do YOU believe this? Do you BELIEVE this? Do you believe THIS?

I have to admit that, if he had asked me that question, I’m not sure how I would have answered it.

I mean, look at the situation: A dead man; two sisters shocked at the sudden loss of their dear brother, and fearful at having to face an unknown future—all of that plus much more loaded the question: “Do you believe this? Do you believe me? Do you believe IN me?”

How could anybody be sure enough to answer that with certain with certainty, without doubting at least a little or even a lot? But then came her answer, strong, confident and firm: “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

“I believe that you are the Promised One, the Messiah, the Son of God, the One we have been waiting for for generations, the one who has come into the world to deliver us, rescue us, save us.”

Now, I know it wasn’t just me who felt it because I’m sure that all of us there were struck mute at hearing her declaration of faith—a confession that went far beyond anything that we as disciples could express, perhaps even beyond what we believed.

Having made her witness, she left and went to get her sister—to tell Mary that Jesus had arrived--that he was just down the road and was asking for her.

Now, Mary was the one who, in many ways, was nearest and dearest to the Master—the one who had sat at his feet and listened attentively to his words even though Martha, and the other men present, made it clear that what she was doing was wrong—and not just culturally wrong but religiously wrong.

After all, a “woman” had no place, no right or privilege to be in the close presence of a rabbi, a teacher. A woman’s place was in the kitchen. . .or in the back of the room behind the men. But that kind of thinking didn’t make a lot of difference to Mary who was never one to follow custom or tradition, especially when it came to Jesus.

Nevertheless, here she came running down the road to meet him, one hand holding open the veil that covered her face. . .the veil that mourning women wore--and the other hand holding up her skirt so she wouldn’t trip on it.

Others, outside of the house, followed her and saw her fall to the ground in front of Jesus, holding his legs, her tears washing his feet, crying out the same words of disappointment and confusion that her sister had used: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

And when Jesus saw Mary and those around her who were supporting her and sharing her sorrow, he nearly lost control of his emotions.

Some said later that he appeared to be sad, but, to be honest, from where I was standing right next to him, what I sensed was not just sadness but anger: Not anger at Mary or the mourners, but angry at death. . .at the power death had. . .at the damage death caused. . .at the sorrow death brought. . .at the injustice and unfairness of death . . .and at the finality, the devastating finality, of death.

It was almost as if he intended to go to war and do battle with death. . .to fight it, destroy it, steal its power and crush it once and for all.

I know that sounds ridiculous, almost crazy, but it is what I sensed in him and what I felt coming out of him. He was getting ready to confront death—whether it was the death of his friend. . .or his own.

“Where have you laid him?” he asked after taking Mary by the hand and pulling her to her feet. “Come and see” came the reply. . .and they led him to the tomb which was nearby.

Arriving at the burial ground and seeing the grave, it was as if the reality of his dear friend’s death finally sank in. . .and he wept.

And not just a little tear or a sniffle either, but real, genuine weeping, his tears running down his face into his beard, his shoulders shaking, his whole body wracked with emotion. . .and with the knowledge of what was to come.

Then, after wiping his eyes and face with his sleeve, he regained his composure, gathered himself together again, and told them to take the stone away.

Martha immediately cautioned, “Lord, he has been dead four days. His spirit isn’t anywhere near him anymore. And the smell, the stench of the corpse: It will be too much for any of us, including you.”

“Take the stone away!” he commanded once more, this time more slowly and firmly. Several men did his bidding.

Standing there, facing the black and ominous entrance to the rock tomb looking for all the world like a mouth. . .the forbidding mouth of a devouring demon—a mouth wide open, laughing, mocking and threatening.

Looking directly into that black maw, he dropped to one knee, bowed his head, opened his arms wide, and with his hands facing upward in supplication, he began to pray.

I'm not sure what words he spoke, but I am sure of what I saw next.

Getting to his feet, he stood there, legs apart, chest out, back straight, head up, and in a voice that sounded as if it could wake the dead, he spoke--not shouted really, but spoke forcefully, clearly, distinctly: **"Lazarus! Come out!"**

All of us stood rooted to the ground, spellbound, staring at the darkness, waiting, watching to see what, if anything, would happen . . .what, if anything, we would see.

And then we saw it: Movement. . .a moving shadow. . .becoming a figure--a figure wrapped with bands of cloth. . .only able to shuffle but moving nevertheless. . .moving into the doorway. . .and then moving. . .out of the grave. . .out into the light. . .out into our sight.

"Oh, My God," I gasped. "Oh, my God!"

It was blasphemy, I know, to use such language but there was no other language to use. . .no other words that could and would fit or in any way capture what we were witnessing.

And I remember thinking how glad I was that he had called out the name "Lazarus!" before the command to "Come out". . .because, if he hadn't spoken a name, I swear every single corpse in that cemetery would have come out. . .that all the dead everywhere would have come out of their graves.

Because, "Come out!" is what he commanded. . .and "come out" is what they would have done. . .because "Come out!" is what Lazarus did. HE. . .CAME. . .OUT!

"Unbind him, and let him go" were his next words. "Unbind him, and set him free." "Unbind him, for he is not dead any longer." "Unbind him, because death is dead and Lazarus is alive."

All of that and more was contained in those few words: “Unbind him, and let him go.”

I wish I could say that people rushed to unbind him, but they didn't. Instead, they went forward hesitantly, tentatively, reluctantly, almost fearfully--knees knocking, hands trembling, fingers shaking while trying to loosen the wrappings;

revealing, at first, his face, and then, his hands and feet and then his body--revealing Lazarus, the man who had been dead and was now alive.

I was amazed that Mary and Martha didn't faint, although I wasn't sure they still wouldn't. But when their brother opened his arms wide as if waiting to embrace them, they rushed to him, hugging him, kissing him, holding him and he holding them.

And all three of them shaking—shaking with indescribable joy, crying, shouting, calling out each other's names--and, most of all, calling out their thanks and praise to God for this answer to their prayers.

And then Jesus, their friend. . .their Lord. . .their deliverer and rescuer, their conqueror—he joined them too in what can only be described as a “group hug.”

And then all of us who were standing and watching, suddenly ran toward the four of them, to surround the family with our presence and our tears, our laughter and amazement, our thanks and praise.

To tell the truth: If I, Thomas, hadn't seen it. . .seen him. . .with my own eyes, and if I hadn't felt the skin and flesh of a dead man and found it warm and supple and not cold and hard—

if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and touched him with my own hands, I wouldn't have believed it. . .wouldn't have believed that it was real or possible.

I mean, I'm pretty strongly inclined to doubt wild tales, whether told by women or men, but this one—this one I couldn't doubt. I saw. I knew. And I believed. Lazarus was unbound and free.

And we--and our emotions and our joy--were the same: Free, unbridled, unrestrained, almost unable to believe what our eyes were seeing, and yet gladly and willingly believing.

And free—free to jump up and down and let our happiness, gratitude and astonishment come out in whatever way felt right and felt good.

The pandemonium lasted for a long time and it was during that celebration and rejoicing that he must have slipped away because was then and there that I saw him: Saw Jesus, standing off to the side, by himself, alone.

Not lonely. But alone. Reflective. Pensive. Watching. Observing.

Perhaps even wondering. . . .wondering what could possibly top this. . . wondering what he just had done might mean. .wondering what might be. . . what will be. .what will surely be coming next. . . wondering what will happen now. .what would, and will, happen now.

Amen. SDG

Song of the Day #665 "Rise, Shine, You People!"

1. Rise, shine, you people! Christ the Lord has entered
our human story; God in him is centred.
He comes to us, by death and sin surrounded, with grace unbounded.
2. See how he sends the pow'rs of evil reeling;
he brings us freedom, light and life and healing.
All men and women, who by guilt are driven, now are forgiven.

3. Come, celebrate; your banners high unfurling,
your songs and prayers against the darkness hurling.
To all the world go out and tell the story of Jesus' glory.
4. Tell how the Father sent the Son to save us.
Tell of the Son, who life and freedom gave us.
Tell how the Spirit calls from ev'ry nation God's new creation.

Affirmation of Faith: A Pilgrim's Creed

We are a community of faith.

**We share a vision of God: a God whose spirit is love,
accessible to all yet beyond our knowing,
the source of all being, the way leading to wholeness,
the spirit which pervades everything.**

**We are reborn in the Spirit, followers of that Way shown by Jesus:
to love God with our whole being; to love our neighbours as ourselves;
to treat others as we would have them treat us;**

to strive for justice and peace;

**to have respect and compassion for every person and for the whole of creation;
to forgive those who do us harm; to love one another as Christ has loved us.**

We journey together on this Way towards reconciliation with the whole creation.

We break bread together and pray together.

We reach out to one another for strength beyond our own.

This is our community. This is our faith.

Prayers of Intercession (also known as "Prayers of the People" or "Prayers of the Faithful" or 'Prayers of the Community'). "Intercession" means to "act, plead or pray on behalf of another. . .or to show favour on another"

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, our country and community and the world, and for all who are in need. *A brief silence.*

God of life, bind your faithful people into one body. Enliven the church with your Spirit and bless the work of those who work for its renewal (*like Hans Nielsen Hauge, whom we commemorate today*). Accomplish your work of salvation in us and through us, for the sake of the world.

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer: when I call, answer me.

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

God of life, you love the world you have made and you grieve when creation suffers. Restore polluted lands and waterways. Heal areas of the world and its peoples ravaged by storms, floods, wildfires, droughts, or other natural and threatening disasters such as the Corona virus . Bring all things to new life.

The Lord is my song, the Lord is my praise; all my hope comes from God.

The Lord is my song, the Lord, is my praise: God, the wellspring of life.

God of life, show redemption to all who watch and wait with eager expectation: those longing for wars to cease, those waiting for immigration paperwork to finalize, those seeking election, those whose lives and livelihoods, family and social relationships have been lost or damaged as well as and those in dire need of humanitarian relief. Come quickly with your hope and healing. O Lord, here my prayer,

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer: when I call, answer me.

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

God of life, you weep with those who grieve. Unbind all who are held captive by anxiety, fear, despair, or pain (*especially those known only to you or known to us: Erika and Dorothy, Ingrid and Pam, Ed and Gwen, Bud and Erin, Inez and Terry, Christoph and Jackie, Gordo's mum and dad, and all staff and residents of care homes and hospitals.*

We also pray for those whom we bring before you now by name in silence or aloud. . .

Fill us with compassion and empathy for those who struggle, and keep us faithful in prayer and faithful in our resolution to stay in touch with others.

The Lord is my song, the Lord is my praise; all my hope comes from God.

The Lord is my song, the Lord, is my praise: God, the wellspring of life.

Other intercessions may be offered that are specific to your situation and/or setting

God of life, you are our resurrection. We remember all those who have died and trust that, in you, they will live again (*Rick, Dave and Elias*). Breathe new life into our dry bones, that we, too, might live with you forever.

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer: when I call, answer me.

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sharing of the Peace and the Offering of our hearts, minds, spirits and strength

THANKSGIVING

Prayer for grace to receive the Word

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen. (Elw, p. 72)

Prayer for the Church

Gracious God, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 73)

Prayer in time of conflict, crisis or disaster

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 76)

Luther's Morning Prayer

We give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected us through the night from all harm and danger. We ask that you would also protect us today from sin and all evil, so that our life and actions may please you. Into your hands we commend ourselves, our bodies, our souls, and all that is ours. Let your holy angels be with us, so that the wicked foe may have no power over us. Amen. (ELW, Morning Prayer)

Lord's Prayer *(with one small change as encouraged by Pope Francis and one optional gender change)*

Our Father (Mother) in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Sending Song #336 "Lamb of God"

1. Your only Son, no sin to hide, but have sent him from your side
to walk upon this guilty sod and to become the Lamb of God.

*Refrain: O Lamb of God, sweet Lamb of God, I love the holy Lamb of God.
Oh wash me in your precious blood, my Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.*

2. Your gift of love we crucified. We laughed and scorned him as he died.
The humble king we named a fraud and sacrificed the Lamb of God. Refrain.

3. I was so lost, I should have died, but you have brought me to your side
to be led by your staff and rod and to be called a lamb of God. *Refrain.*

Blessing/Benediction

Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.
May the Holy One, speaking, spoken, and inspiring,
✝ bless you, unbind you, and send you in love and in peace. Amen.

Let us be brave and care for our neighbours and all in need. Thanks be to God.