

John 11:1-57

March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

One day last week, I talked with a good friend and trusted colleague about the coronavirus/Covid 19 pandemic and the effects it is having on society and, in particular, the church. Larry said, "I've sensed a lot of grief from people, almost as if someone has died." He then went on to talk about the familiar five stages of grief: 1. Denial and isolation; 2. Anger; 3. Bargaining; 4. Depression; 5. Acceptance. It is well documented that people who are grieving do not necessarily go through the stages in the same order or experience all of them.

I think Larry is right in his description of our experience during this coronavirus pandemic. In January, as we first began to hear reports from Wuhan, China, we probably started moving into the denial and isolation stage. It sounds like a cliché, but we might have thought, "That sounds serious, but it can't possibly happen to us here in the United States or Wallace, North Carolina." Even when the Covid 19 virus began to show up in Washington State and New York City, we might have been in denial. However, as the virus spread rapidly and the infection curve got steeper instead of flattening out, it became impossible to deny the seriousness of the situation before us. The isolation that often comes along with denial is not something we've chosen for ourselves. Two months ago, how many of us knew what "social distancing" meant, much less how to practice it in our daily lives? And yet, here we are (or, more accurately, there you are out in cyberspace) trying to be together even as we have to be apart.

Certainly, there is some anger associated with this pandemic. Families whose loved ones have died, spouses who are cut off from one another, business owners who have had to shut the doors and lay off employees, brides and grooms who have had to postpone their weddings, high school and college seniors who are missing out on one of life's biggest transitions – there's plenty of anger to go around, but the reality is, it's hard to know who or what to be angry at. Can you be angry at a virus you can't see? Nevertheless, the anger is real.

I don't know that we're at the bargaining stage quite yet, although people in other hard-hit countries might have already done their share of bargaining. Sadly, the bargaining doesn't change the situation; it's an attempt to regain some control over circumstances and events that are beyond our control.

In the midst of all of the advice being given out about how to cope with the Covid 19 pandemic, there is plenty of concern about peoples' mental health. The enormity of the problem, the world-wide scale, and the forced isolation are cause for concern. Depression is real as we find ourselves cut off from the communities and people that

give us life, and as we face the uncertainty of not knowing when all of this is going to come to and life will get back to normal (if ever).

Perhaps you've never heard about, read about, or studied the five stages of grief and loss, first proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. But it's a safe bet that you've experienced these feelings in different stages when someone close to you has died or life has changed in an unexpected and dramatic way.

The lectionary passage for this fifth Sunday in Lent is the story about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Upon first reading this story, we could wonder what in the world this gospel story has to say to us today in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. A closer reading of the story, however, reveals that this story, which is literally a matter of life and death, has much to say to us who are facing an unprecedented situation, literally a matter of life and death for hundreds of thousands (maybe ultimately millions) worldwide, certainly a time of grief and loss for a way of life.

It may be an anachronism to describe first-century Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, in terms of a 20th/21st century theory of grief and loss, but the grieving women demonstrate the stages of grief and loss.

- We don't know how Mary and Martha reacted when their brother died, but we get a clue about how they are feeling from how they greet Jesus when he finally shows up. Both of the sisters say the same thing: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." You can hear their sorrow and wistfulness – maybe even a bit of anger – in their voices.
- Certainly, there was much grieving, as John tells us about "the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling [Mary]." When Mary got up to go out and greet Jesus, her neighbors followed her, "because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there." Why, we're even told that Jesus himself wept (v. 35), so that the Jews commented, "See how he loved him!"
- There might even have been some bargaining going on. Martha was bold enough to say to Jesus (after she expressed her disappointment and sadness that Jesus had not shown up sooner), "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Martha doesn't make an explicit offer to do something, but you get the impression she would do whatever she could to have her beloved brother back.
- And, in these few short verses, we go through all five stages of grief and loss. Martha accepts the fact that her brother is dead. When Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again," Martha looks ahead to the resurrection on the last day. Until then, Lazarus is dead and cold in the tomb. When Jesus says, "Take away the stone," Martha very pragmatically states/warns, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Yes, because of death, life for Mary and Martha has changed forever. But Jesus has more to offer them than just comforting words in difficult times or some far-in-the-future hope, disconnected from the trying times they are living through. When Martha says about Lazarus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on

the last day,” Jesus gives the greatest promise of the scriptures (for then and now): “I am the resurrection and the life.” Right here – right now – in the presence of the sealed-up tomb and a four-day-dead body that has a stench.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” The promise comes to you and to me in the midst of the coronavirus/Covid 19 pandemic – in the midst of social distancing and panic buying and financial uncertainty and questions about when things will be back to normal.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is no security blanket or force field guarding against the trials and tribulations of life. In fact, as we heard at the end of the story, the chief priests and the Pharisees put the word out that they wanted to know where Jesus was so they could arrest him. Just a few verses later, we read “So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and believing in Jesus.” (John 12:10-11) Ironically, a tomb full of death and stench is changed into new life through the present power of the resurrection, only to lead to another tomb full of death on Good Friday.

Jesus’ message, “I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” doesn’t ignore the reality of grief and loss and death and stench and uncertainty and change. Instead, the promise of the power of the resurrection – right here, right now – overcomes our grief and loss and death and stench and uncertainty and change. We don’t have to wait until some day in the future to realize the certainty of God’s love and power in our lives.

The news is full of death and dying and uncertainty for the next few weeks and months. Our faith in the risen Lord Jesus gives us the hope we need to make it through these days. In her commentary on this story about Lazarus coming out of the tomb, Meda Stamper writes, “Being in a relationship with Jesus means facing death and grief with him and learning that still, in spite of the death and the dryness and the finality of the door at the entrance to the tomb of our hopes, he can still be said to be life. Nothing is ever so dead that it keeps him from being that in himself and for us. And in John that life is not only a future hope. Abundant life is always ever now.

“As we approach Holy Week, having Jesus at our tombs also means that we must follow him to his. We must endure the silence of his Saturday even as we endure the silences of our own. But we endure them knowing already that Sunday will surely come, that when we are walking in the garden of our grief, we will meet him again.”¹

Because it is always a matter of life and death – and especially right now, in a very unprecedented way – we can take heart and be assured when we hear Jesus say, there at the door to Lazarus’ tomb, “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?”

Let us pray: Christ our Savior, you call us by name, leading us from death into eternal life. Awaken and unbind us by your Word, so that we may live and grow in faith, sharing your saving love with others; for you are the resurrection and the life. Amen.

NOTES

¹Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 11:1-45," www.workingpreacher.org.