

Sermon – Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 11: 1-45

“Out of the depths I have called to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice.” Psalm 130 v1

These words are the first verse of Psalm 130 the psalm set for today, this fifth Sunday in Lent. We might all be feeling the psalmist’s prayer as we live with the pandemic that has enveloped the world. It is like a weight that has been placed on us, that might leave us feeling very much down in the depths. Despairing, anxious, fearful and depressed are feelings that come to mind at times like this.

We are now in a very different reality from the one that existed at the beginning of this season of Lent. We are separated from each other and from family members because of the social distancing requirements and the stay-at-home policy that have been put in place in the city, state and nation to shutdown this virus. Separation from you has left me more deeply longing to see you again. The rhythm of my week was such that most things I did were focused on Sunday and on our liturgies that we shared together. Maybe you too felt this cadence to your life.

When I was told by Bishop Provenzano that we could not meet for the first Sunday on March 15, I felt quite empty and lost. Suddenly something that was the center of my life, worshipping with all of you here in the sanctuary of this church, was taken away. It took me a few days to come out of those feelings and to try and find what God was now calling me to do. Slowly over the past two weeks a new sense of God’s call has arisen.

The effects of the pandemic on each one of us, and our families and friends, is unique to each of us. However, we all share in the sense that life has changed and we have to adapt. Certainly we have to adapt physically because our movements have been curtailed by the need to protect ourselves and others from the spread of the virus. Our lives of faith may have changed as well. Often during such times of crisis we lean into God more intensely, seeking guidance, comfort and succor that will sustain us as we try and sustain others.

I found great comfort in reading some of the psalms. One of the great things about the psalms is that they give voice to human feelings of both lament and sadness, and of joy. Whatever we are feeling when trying times descend upon us there is most often a psalm that will mirror our feelings and help us to draw closer to God as we read and reflect on their sentiments.

“Out of the depths I have called to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice.” So we might have found ourselves calling out to the Lord to hear our voice. Prayer is such an important part of our spiritual life as it brings us close to God, through Jesus Christ, as we lay out before God our pains, our fears, our concerns, or hope and our praise. We also know that God forms the prayers on our hearts and is intimate with us as we offer up our heartfelt prayers.

Lord, hear my voice! Lord, hear my longing. Lord hear my desire. Lord hear my concern.

The Lord will hear what we offer, even if we offer only silent reflection, bringing to mind all those people who are suffering, dying alone, working on the front lines of clinical support for the sick, those working in support roles, our local grocery store workers, mail workers, MTA drivers and the many who have lost their jobs.

We give voice to their needs, our own needs and the needs of our families.

My prayer is for all of you at this difficult time; Lord hear my voice.

The gospel reading you heard this morning comes from the eleventh chapter of the gospel according to John. It tells of the story of the illness and death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, and the brother of Mary and Martha. When the message about Lazarus' illness reached Jesus he told the messenger that the illness Lazarus had would not lead to his death, rather it would lead to God's glory, so that the Son of God would be glorified through it.

In hearing this new Jesus did not panic. He didn't feel the need to immediately drop what he was doing and rush off to Bethany to tend to Lazarus, and maybe to relieve the anxiety of Mary and Martha. He stayed where we was for two more days. Some may see this as callous and showing somewhat indifference to the needs of his friends. However, Jesus was able to see through situations in ways that we can't.

For many people today, fear and anxiousness fill their lives, because we can't see through this pandemic. We panic that we don't know when it will end. I said recently to a colleague that I felt like I was standing at the foot of Mt Everest, wondering how I was going to get to the top and then back down again in one piece. I also felt like I was standing there quite unprepared without the necessary equipment and protective gear to safely make the journey.

Our humanness has very clear limitations. So much of our lives are built on past memories and experiences. We are able to function each day because in the days and weeks before we did similar things. When a major change happens to life such as we have all experienced we have no reference points. It is not quite like the days after 9/11, nor the days after Super Storm Sandy, nor the days after a major blizzard. We have trouble getting our bearings because this is a completely new experience and it is going to go on much longer than anything we've gone through before.

Jesus knew that Lazarus would rise again even if he died before Jesus got to him. In fact, Jesus' actions were deliberate so that he could demonstrate to those that gathered to mourn Lazarus, that life was still in him even as he died. When Jesus reached the place where he met Martha and then Mary, and saw their sadness and grief, he too was overcome with emotion and cried

with them. Even though he knew the outcome would be good, he was still enveloped in the very deep anguish that illness and death brings close to us.

After Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, those that had come from Jerusalem to mourn with Martha and Mary, were changed. The glory of God, working through his son Jesus, had revealed a new aspect of life. That is, Jesus calling Lazarus from death demonstrated to those gathered that the power of God to overcome even death, was possible. And we are told they believed.

All three readings today speak to us about God's power over life and death. Ezekiel's vision was about God's power to gather together the bones of the deceased that had been left out in the open valley. He saw the power of God to restore what seemed completely unable to be restored. It was as if creation was being reversed. Bones, to sinew, to flesh and finally the spirit of life. It was of course a metaphor for the new life that Israel was to receive.

The Apostle Paul tells his friends in Rome about the power of the spirit over the failing of the flesh. The flesh of each of us is mortal and perishable, but the spirit that lives within each of us that believes in the power of Jesus Christ, will sustain us even though our bodies are dead due to sin. The spirit is life because of righteousness, Paul says.

So on this Sunday, the fifth Sunday in Lent, when we are separated physically, but not spiritually, we can reflect on what it means to put our full faith and hope in God, to bring us through this time of trial. We might not be able to see the course of the pandemic as it unfolds each day, but God does. With our faith fully in God, and our faith fully in the Holy Spirit working with all those that are tending the sick, and leading us, we will come out of this time and be able to gather again for common worship and fellowship.

May this day you find this online service a connection to your fellow parishioners as we together give thanks for human ingenuity and technology that allows us to be together, even though apart.

May God have mercy upon you and bring you peace and comfort during this most difficult time.

Amen