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AMDG

Lent 5A – March 29, 2020

Well, what could this long strange story be trying to say to us about God's love and mercy?

When you think about the gory details of raising up dead Lazarus, not to mention the spookiness of Ezekiel preaching to a valley of skeletons, doesn't it weird you out just a little bit? I mean Lazarus had been dead for four days and was already starting to smell. Did practical, dutiful Martha even want her moldering dead brother raised up? Very creepy.

All that dead stuff is disturbing enough, but then the interactions between Jesus and his disciples, and his friends Martha and Mary bring up some tough questions about God's role in our lives, not least of which is, why couldn't Jesus have gotten there sooner, so his friend Lazarus didn't have to die, and his friends didn't have to suffer? Was God or Jesus playing with the emotions of his followers and friends to make a point? Is that how God works in our lives, making us suffer, just so God can be glorified? It certainly makes us think about our current situation and wonder, "where is God in all of this?" "Did God cause this pandemic to happen to make a point, and what could that point be?"

This story, with all its unpleasantness and awkward questions, takes us to the very edge of the mystery of our faith. What part does God play in our lives? Yes, we experience God in the pretty sunrises and the loving relationships. We can feel God's presence in prayer and worship, in art, and music, in serving others. But how do we experience God in suffering, through illness and death, and in the dark periods of our lives? In today's Gospel the writers seem to portray God as manipulating painful situations in life - such as the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus - to show God's glory, perhaps even to foreshadow the coming death and resurrection of Jesus. And, that gets us part the way into the mystery. In the tragedies of our own lives we may experience God's silence and God's absence as perhaps punishing, maybe even manipulative. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the psalms, show God's people experiencing God in this way - out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice. Pleading with a silent God for relief from the painful realities of life. But, where is God? Does God not care? Jesus' words and deeds showed us that we will find our questions answered not in our worldly expectations being met, nor in our worst fears coming to pass - but in the tension between the two. Our belovedness in God is in the midst of our worst fears and our greatest aspirations. Jesus takes all the unpleasantness, the stench, the sorrow, the hopes, the fears, the disappointments - and he redeems it all. He showed us especially through his passion, death, and resurrection that there is nothing that cannot be made good in God's world. That doesn't mean that everything is perfect - but it does mean that everything is in God's hands, part of God's great plan to redeem all things in Christ, all things, even death.

One of the worst deaths I've ever had to experience was the death of a student at the elementary school where I was principal. Trevor was six years old, in kindergarten. One cold morning in February, while his mother was sleeping off a night of drugs, Trevor and his older brother, thinking they had missed the bus, decided to walk to school. It was winter, and still dark. And, when they crossed Ft. Lowell Blvd. they didn't see the car until it was upon them. The older boy made it across. Trevor did not, and was killed instantly. The car drove away, and no one was ever caught. This was a horrible tragedy. It should never have happened. And, for me, it was made even worse by the fact that I was not at school when it happened. I was at a conference in Northern Arizona when my secretary called me with the news. Throughout the day, I spoke by phone with staff members, central administrators, and parents, trying to be of some support from 300 miles away. The pleading of some of my staff still haunts me, Why aren't you here? When can you be here? This time of social-distancing has brought up some of the pain of not being able to be physically present with my people in a difficult time.

There was plenty to do when I returned the next day and for many weeks to come. The death of Trevor haunted us all for a very long time. And, as painful and horrific as the experience was, good things happened in the wake of this tragedy. Lights were installed at the place where Trevor

was killed. Ben's Bells, a local not-for-profit, came to our school and did grief recovery activities with our staff, inspiring some of them to continue working with the organization. Trevor's brother and younger sister were taken from the mother that could not care for them and raised by their grandmother and stepfather. The last I heard, both were doing well. And, I know for many months and even years after, we all held our children just a little closer. Several years later, when nine year old Christina Taylor Green was one of the victims of the mass shooting in Tucson that seriously wounded Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, I could be with my good friend, Christina's principal, and walk with him as he went through a similar horror. Looking back now, I see that God's redemptive work inserted itself throughout the random, senseless death of a six-year old boy, bringing love and healing and peace in the aftermath.

God is not some puppeteer in the sky, playing out the tragedies of our lives for his amusement. However, this is God's world, with all its beauty and messiness; all its grandeur and darkness, all part of God's cosmic plan to bring all things to glory. And, it is the love of God, made manifest in Jesus Christ, working through the Spirit in us, that redeems the brokenness, messiness, and ugliness of the world. It is you and me, firm in the knowledge of who we are whose we are, that take the nightmare that life can often be and transform it into the dream God has intended all along.

As we walk the difficult and uncertain road that covid-19 puts us on, we can be very certain of one thing, God will make good of this terrible time. God will raise up our dry spirits and weary bones and make of us a more faithful and loving people. We will be transformed by this event. It's already happening. Attendance in church is up, even though it is "over cyberspace," people are more present with one another, reaching out to each other in loving and supportive ways, we're re-learning what is truly important and what is not. God is at work!

When we consider the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead, in fact any miracle, we must remember that the great miracle of all creation is that God uses the very things that should destroy us—the random tragedies of life and the detritus of our own sins, the ugly, the unjust, the sorrowful, in fact death itself—God uses it all to transform and bring the

light of God's love into the world. Death is not just physical dying, but going to the full depth of things, beyond where we are in control. And in that sense, we all go through many deaths in our lifetime, small opportunities to choose transformation instead of stagnation. When we choose to walk through life as it is, not as we would have it be, when we walk through the depths—even the depths of our own sin and mistakes, even the depths of our doubts and despair — we come out the other side, knowing we've been taken there by a Power greater than ourselves. Being saved by Jesus' cross and resurrection doesn't mean that we're any better than anyone else, or that we're somehow sheltered from life's challenges. It means we've chosen to accept the paradoxes of life, to walk through the darkness, and allowed and accepted the great mystery of transformation. There is nothing or no one that cannot be used for our good and God's glory, if only we will open ourselves to the Spirit working in and through us. This is the great mystery of faith. It is how God is saving the world in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament  
Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

## The Response

### Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord;  
Lord, hear my voice; \*  
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, \*  
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 For there is forgiveness with you; \*  
therefore you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him; \*  
in his word is my hope.
- 5 My soul waits for the Lord,  
more than watchmen for the morning, \*  
more than watchmen for the morning.
- 6 O Israel, wait for the Lord, \*  
for with the Lord there is mercy;
- 7 With him there is plenteous redemption, \*

and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

### The Epistle

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

### The Gospel

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But 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." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death,

but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When 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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The 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. When 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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The 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.”

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