

Lent 5A — March 29, 2020 — John 11:25-26 — Jesus is the Life

Mary and Martha experienced the absence of God. Our gospel for today doesn't begin until verse 17. But in the early parts of this chapter it tells how Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus about Lazarus being ill. And then we read two very strange verses, verses 5 and 6. They say, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days." Hold those facts together in your mind. Ponder them in your heart. Jesus knew that Lazarus was ill and would soon die. Jesus heard their prayer and their cry for help. And even though he loved them, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days. Jesus wanted them to experience the absence of God.

We can sympathize with Mary and Martha, can't we? All around our country people have died and are dying. We send up our prayers to the Lord. And we get no answer. Has he heard us? Will he come to our defense? Why does God seem so far away when we need him the most? Today our gospel shows us the purpose behind the absence of God. We too must experience God's absence so that his glory may be revealed; and so that we may believe that Jesus is the life.

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. But the funeral was still going on. A large number of mourners had sat themselves down in Mary and Martha's living room. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. And right away Martha expresses how deeply she missed him. It's not an accusation against Jesus or even a rebuke. She just wants Jesus to know that she felt his absence. Martha says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Isn't that a beautiful expression of faith? We often fail to give Martha enough credit. We always remember the story from Luke 10 where Martha was busy in the kitchen while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening. We remember how Martha complained about having to do all the work. And Jesus told her, "Mary has chosen what is better." So we usually draw the conclusion that Mary had the stronger faith. Well what if Martha had the stronger faith? What if Jesus knew that Mary needed to sit and listen rather than work in the kitchen? Because today we see Martha rushing out to meet Jesus. Today we see her bold confession of faith in Jesus.

We need to understand that only believers feel the absence of God. Unbelievers will mock the power of prayer. They feel convinced that God does not exist and therefore is not present and cannot answer. But they don't feel the absence of God. Think of how a widow feels after her husband dies. More than anyone, she feels the pain of his absence. And she feels that way not just because he can't open jars for her; not just because he can't hold her in his arms. She feels the absence of her husband because she still loves him. So also with believers. We feel the absence of God not just for what he hasn't done. We feel it because we love God. And we know the great things he has done for us in the past. We believe that he loves us; that he gives good gifts to his people; and that he hears our prayers and cries for help.

In response to Martha's statement, Jesus said, "Your brother will rise again." And it should be clear to us that Jesus already has in mind what he will do. But he leaves his statement open ended for Martha's sake. He's leading her on the path to a deeper faith. So when Martha confesses her faith in the resurrection at the last day, Jesus responds. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus needs Martha to understand that resurrection is not just some far off event. Resurrection is not just a mirage in the distance that disappears when you get close. Resurrection is standing right in front of her. Life is standing right in front of her. Because Jesus has the power of resurrection and life in himself.

Little Jimmy felt terrified of flying. His father had tried to comfort him by explaining that statistically, you're safer on an airplane than driving in a car. Jimmy's mother tried to comfort him by saying she would sit next to him and hold his hand the entire time. None of this did any good. As they boarded the plane, Jimmy became more and more hysterical. Thankfully a flight attendant noticed the problem. She invited the boy up to the front of the plane to meet the pilot. When they returned to their seats, Jimmy said he still felt nervous. But he knew that that man at the front of the plane would keep them all safe. And so it is with us

on the topic of death. We know that statistically, everyone dies. And though we might feel a little better if someone holds our hand, it doesn't take away our fear. We can only find comfort when we get to know Jesus. And the better we know him, the more comfort we receive.

Jesus is life because all living things were made through him. Jesus is life because he could say the word, and Lazarus would come out of the tomb under his own power. Jesus is life because death could not keep its hold on him. He would die on the cross. And after three days, he would rise to live again. Jesus is life. And we receive life from Jesus in the same way that little Jimmy got over his fear of flying. It's by faith! Jesus said, "The one who believes in me will live even though they die." At first glance this looks like a cryptic statement. How can a person live "even though they die"? As believers, Jesus calls us to die to self. We die to the world. We die to sin. Those things have no hold on us—no power over us. Because we died to them. And now we have a new life in Jesus. We live to glorify God and serve our neighbor. We live to be light in a world of darkness and salt in a world that slowly falling apart. And what we gain in this new life far outweighs what we lost from the old.

Finally, Jesus says, "whoever lives by believing in me will never die." This statement also sounds cryptic and strange. Especially since Jesus is speaking to a woman whose brother has just died! But consider the meaning of death. Death means separation. And not just separation of the body from the soul. The penalty for sin was separation from God and from all of his goodness and grace. It was suffering all the torments of hell for eternity. But what happens when a believer dies? Certainly their soul separates from their body. But then that soul goes to live with God in heaven. For believers, death has become the gateway to heaven and the beginning of eternal life with God. Even the separation of their soul and body is only temporary as they wait for the resurrection of their bodies on the last day. In this sense, believers never really die. We only sleep for a little while. And before long our Savior will come to wake us up. And he will call us out of the grave, not as zombies or walking corpses. He will raise us with new and glorified bodies to continue our life everlasting.

"Do you believe this?" Jesus asked Martha. He didn't ask her, "Do you understand all this?" Or, "Does this make sense to you?" Jesus wanted to know, "Do you trust me Martha? Even though you felt my absence when your brother died? Even though you had to suffer during these last few days?" Jesus asks us the same question today. Do you trust that he loves you and wants good things for you? Do you trust that he has total power over life and death? Do you trust that he is the resurrection and the life? Because even though we feel the absence of God, he is never absent. He is with us always. And our life is in him. Amen.