

**SUNDAY DEVOTIONS**  
**29 MARCH 2020 – LENT 5**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

In the wilderness  
we cry out to our God.  
In the wilderness  
our souls wait.  
In the wilderness  
we hope in God's word.  
In the wilderness  
we know God's steadfast love.  
And so, in the wilderness  
we worship together.

**OPENING PRAYER**

God of life, present and promised, you are the One to whom we call: for you are the One who hears, and you are the One who acts, bringing us new life with your grace and love and power.

Lead us in our time of worship, that we may be prepared to follow your lead in places where life is at risk—places where hope seems far away, places where dreams die during sleep. When we leave these walls, help us live the teachings we proclaim within this place of worship, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**PRAYER OF ADORATION – *A litany for Lent***

Christ of the comfortable,  
you would call us  
from our security and sameness,  
down that unknown path  
which leads to God's heart:  
with trust, we would place  
our hands in yours, and follow.

Companion of our sleepless nights,  
you would beckon us  
out of the shadows of our fears,  
calling us to bring our doubts  
and questioning hearts along:  
with humility, we would listen  
to those answers we do not  
expect, or even understand.

Word which creates out of nothingness,  
you would fill us with life  
where we see only emptiness,  
you would keep your promises  
when all ours lie littered on the ground:  
we would let your grace transform  
us into faithful disciples.

*Silence is kept*

Keeper of every moment,  
walk with us, we pray.  
Watcher in the night:  
stay with us, we pray.  
Spirit of new life:  
be in us, we pray.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (*from Psalm 130*)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.  
Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleading!  
If you, O LORD, if you took our faults and wrong actions into account,  
Lord, who could stand before you?  
But in you there is a deep well of forgiveness,  
so that you may be held in holy awe.  
I wait for you, O LORD, I wait with deep longing,  
and in your word I stand, waiting in hope.  
My deep longing for the Lord  
is more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who wait for an end to the night.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS (*from Psalm 130*)

Our hope in you, O LORD!  
For with you there is steadfast love,  
and great power to save.  
It is the LORD God who will save us from all our wrongdoing.  
Thanks be to God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,  
Be at peace.  
Your sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.

BIBLE READINGS

*Ezekiel 37:1-14*  
*Romans 8:6-11*  
*John 11:1-45*

SERMON *The death and raising of Lazarus*

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

We believe in God, Father, Creator and Creating;  
who gives us steadfast love,  
and shares with us our joy,  
and sustains us in our suffering.  
God's power is open to us; we trust him.

We follow Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man.  
His death is our victory, his resurrection is our hope;  
in him the Word became flesh;  
in him we are offered forgiveness from sin,  
renewal from failure,

reconciliation from brokenness,  
release from despair.

We are guided by the Holy Spirit,  
God's presence in the world.  
By the Spirit we are called into Christ's Church,  
to celebrate his love,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
to share with him in Baptism and to eat at his Table.

Because we are his disciples, his pilgrim people,  
we joyfully covenant with each other to walk together in love,  
to pray for one another, to care for one another,  
to live in Koinonia, in life, in death, in life beyond death.  
God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious God, you give life to our bones. You raise us up each day, strengthening us for service to you. Through the costly gift of Jesus, your son, you make us worthy to live with you throughout eternity. Make us conscious of this gift of life you provide and give us courage to share this good news with others. (Ezekiel 37: 1-14)

God of all nations, be present with leaders of all nations that they may rule with justice and mercy. Curb our warring madness. Be present with the people of war-torn lands as their leaders struggle with find peace for their people. We watch for the arrival of your peace. (Psalm 130)

Dear Lord, you created us and gave us families. Like Mary and Martha we may not see eye-to-eye all the time. Like Lazarus, we may feel dead inside. Remind us of your constant presence in our homes. Reconnect us with those we love who have wandered or from whom we've distanced ourselves. Through your daily gift of new life, restore us in love. (John 11: 1-45)

Restoring Lord, you alone offer wholeness and healing. You are the source of all life. Be with all who provide care for your wounded children. Be with those who suffer in mind, body or spirit.

This morning, we pray especially for...

Touch these and all your children with your tender loving care. (Rom 8: 6-11)

Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

We go now to walk in the light of Christ,  
to trust in the one who is resurrection and life.  
Let us stand firm before the forces of death  
and speak words of life. Amen.

## THE DEATH AND RAISING OF LAZARUS

Lent 5 Year A

Ez. 27:1-14; Ps. 130; Rom. 8:6-11; Jn. 11:1-45

29/03/2020

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Way back in March of 1996 (14 years ago, almost to the day), TIME Magazine covered two amazing stories—one is about the horrors of death and the other is about a celebration of life.

The first story covered the death and maiming of twenty-one grade one students and their teacher in the town of Dunblane in Scotland. Sixteen of the children and their teacher were killed. Eleven were wounded, some seriously. The article tells of the pain and anguish of the parents, relatives and friends as they tried to come to grips with the death of their innocent loved ones. They, as we would, searched in vain for meaning in this terrible tragedy, for there can be none. There is nothing, within or without, our Christian faith that can justify the senseless slaughter of innocent children. And in the years since, we have all seen and read of similar horror stories—particularly from the USA.

The second story, would fill you with absolute delight. It is the story of two girls, Abigail and Brittany Hensel—twin six year old sisters. They were healthy, beautiful, bright and shared a delightful sense of humour. The only complication in their lives was that they were, and still are, joined together in one body. The author of the article writes, “Abby controls the right limbs, Brittany the left. Although they have separate necks and heads, separate hearts, stomachs and spinal cords, they share a bloodstream and all organs below the waist. In medical terms they are known as “conjoined twins.” In human terms, though, they are two very different people, with separate opinions, tastes and dreams.” (TIME Magazine, March 25, 1996) You may have heard of them more recently as, just in the last couple of years, they have begun their teaching career—together, of course.

Two stories—one that leads us to the despair of unanswered questions—the other, a celebration of life lived in hope. Both give us a realisation of and appreciation for the sanctity of life. But death is not the end of life—it’s a part of life and something that we all must endure. Statistics are clear on this—ten out of every ten people in this world, die. Not very encouraging is it? It is the surest thing in life—that and taxes. This is in spite of what John Galsworthy writes in his epic novel, *The Forsyte Saga*: “When a Forsyte died—but no Forsyte had as yet died; death being contrary to their principles, they took precautions against it.”

The gospel passage that you heard this morning from John's account, tells the story of the sickness and death of Jesus' close friend, Lazarus—and Jesus' unusual response to the message of his illness. Within the story you can see the pain and desperation of his sisters, Mary and Martha, as Lazarus sinks slowly into death. But there is also a glimmer of hope as they send a message to Jesus, telling of Lazarus' situation. They knew that Jesus could heal him, if only he could arrive in time. There is, in this account, both the fear of death and the hope for life.

Jesus, however, uses this situation to go beyond just the raising of Lazarus, to also teach us something of his own death and resurrection. Can meaning be found in death? What happens after death? How does this passage lead us to a greater understanding of the nature and work of Jesus Christ?

Jesus tells us right up front, even before he went to Bethany, that the death of Lazarus has the overarching purpose of glorifying God. And when Jesus stated that this illness would not lead to death, he didn't mean that Lazarus would not die. What Jesus meant was that the final result of Lazarus' illness, would not be death but instead, would be the for the glorification of God. While everyone around Jesus focussed upon the impending death of Lazarus, Jesus challenges them—and us—to look at this event from a different perspective. The point of the illness, from this different perspective, is not whether Lazarus will die or not, or even whether Jesus could or would heal him or not. Instead, Jesus challenges us to look beyond the painful circumstance of this event, to God and his glorification.

Circumstances around us at times may look rather grim. We can and do suffer from time to time, from all kinds of trials and tribulations. We suffer loss, heartache, loneliness and pain. When we're going through these things it's easy to focus on the pain or hurt. However when we focus on God in these circumstances, we realise that he is already in the midst of the them—watching over us, bringing glory to himself. And this focus takes us even further—it also calls us to centre ourselves, not just on God, but also on Jesus Christ, for whom this situation provides us with a representation of his own life and ministry. Jesus used the very real situation of Lazarus' illness and death, as an illustration of his own suffering and death—and consequent resurrection.

Through this true-life drama, Jesus is hoping to prepare his followers for his own death—and to help them understand the necessity of his death and ultimately for the life that follows. It would serve as an illustration to his followers, who after the event would be able to look back and (hopefully) understand.

Hence, both the death of Lazarus and the death of Jesus point to and focus on the glorification of God, in the outworking of his will and his plan of salvation. In the immediate situation, the death of Lazarus is to show the power of God, in his resurrection, through Christ, who has the power over death. In this way, Jesus' messiahship is assured and God is glorified.

For Lazarus, death was not the end of his life—at least, not at this time. We know, from reading the account a little further, that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead four days after he had died—also pointing to his own resurrection, three days after his death on the cross. We can see, therefore, a parallel between these two events—revealing Jesus as the Messiah, who would die for his people in the fulfilment of prophecy.

Before either of these events happened, however, Jesus made some unusual statements to Martha. Again, his response to Martha's anguish is two-pronged. First, knowing what he was about to do, he refers to the impending resurrection of Lazarus. But even there, Martha misunderstands Jesus' words. At first, not willing to dare to believe that Jesus would actually raise Lazarus, physically, from death, she is prepared, only, to accept that on the judgement day, Lazarus would again rise up, as would all the dead.

In Jesus' next statement, however, he goes beyond referring to the physical raising of Lazarus. Here, he states something about who he is. "I am the resurrection and the life." He does not say, "I can give resurrection." or "I can raise someone from death." So much is resurrection and life a part of himself—his own nature—that he says that he IS the resurrection. He IS the life.

The linking of resurrection and life points to the truth that the life that Jesus brings is the life of the age to come—eternal life. This also brings out the truth that physical death is not the important thing. For those who believe in Christ, death is not the end (I say this at every funeral I conduct)—it is merely the door through which we pass to further life and fellowship with God. This idea transcends or goes beyond the remote idea of a

resurrection at the end of time—to which Martha was referring. It means that at the moment when a person puts his or her trust in Jesus, he or she begins to experience resurrected life.

This does not mean, however, that we will not die physically. Lazarus was dead even then, and millions have died ever since. What Jesus means, is that, for the believer, death no longer has eternal significance. For us, as it was for Martha, Jesus sets forth a challenge: “Do you believe this.” The answer is important. “Do you believe this?” Our response should echo Martha’s: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

In facing the parallels that come out of the account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, we are confronted by Christ’s own the understanding of his ministry on this earth—a ministry that would first lead to death on a cross and then on to a resurrection that brings new life for all. As we attempt to come to grips with the senseless slaughter of innocent children and wonder at life in its uniqueness, we find that there are no answers to satisfy our curiosity. There is only God, who offers hope through Jesus Christ.

The well-known Jewish author, Chaim Potok, tells of his struggle to become a writer, against his mother’s wishes. Heated discussions between him and his mother grew more and more intense: “Chaim, be a brain surgeon.” “No I want to become a writer.” This went on and on, until finally one day...

The pressure intensified. Finally there was an explosion. Chaim, you’re wasting your time. Be a brain surgeon. You’ll keep a lot of people from dying; you’ll make a lot of money. The explosion detonated a counter-explosion: “Mama, I don’t want to keep people from dying; I want to show them how to live.” (E. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p 47)

Throughout any and all the crappy circumstances of life—whatever they may be—the life that we live—the life that we *choose* to live—while surrounded by suffering and death, should always be lived with our eyes on Jesus—the author of OUR resurrection and the author of OUR life—and our focus, not be on us, but always be towards the glorification of God. Only here will you find resurrection. Only here will you find life.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.