

5 Lent – Year A – April 10, 2011
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45
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With the kind of high budget Hollywood grandeur that we expect from a classic Cecil B. DeMille movie, brought to us in the rich texture and nuances of glorious Technicolor, and with a heart rending orchestral accompaniment, the lectionary has blessed us with another epic tale from the Gospel of John this week. The trailers call us believe what we see and hear. “Jesus wows the crowd with His seventh and most spectacular sign”. “Mary and Martha’s stinging rebukes crumble to dust as Lazarus emerges from his tomb.” “Death is transformed to abundant life.” In many respects, today’s Gospel lesson is the pivotal point in John’s Gospel. Jesus moves from His public ministry bringing people to faith, to Jerusalem, His passion on the cross, and His glorification in the resurrection. Our own Lenten meditations and disciplines also offer significant movement in our spiritual lives. We are transitioning into greater understanding of ourselves, and a deeper relationship with God in Christ Jesus. Before Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem next Sunday, we have this final opportunity to focus on two important lessons from today’s Gospel reading. Both are fruit of the Spirit, and in the busy-ness of our hectic lives pose quite a challenge to each of us. Both are beautifully reflected in the story of the raising of Lazarus. The first is patience. The second is self-control.

My favorite story about patience comes from a friend who lives in the suburbs of Boston, but used to work in Beverly on the North shore. Her commute to work is about forty minutes. One day, the weather was awful, pouring with rain, and the traffic was seriously backed up. To compound the issue, Joan was running late, and incredibly frustrated by the whole mess. As the situation deteriorated and the clock kept ticking, she finally wound down her window, put her arm out into the rain and shook her fist at the sky, shouting, “God, give me patience and give it to me now!”

We all struggle with God’s timing. Martha and Mary send word to Jesus, and are obviously deeply frustrated by Jesus’ delay in coming to them. This story and others from Scripture make it clear that Jesus obeys God’s will alone, and does nothing at the dictates of others. Jesus does what He does in God’s time, according to God’s will. He’s not moved by the whims of the world, or even the apparent distress of hearing that one of his closest friends is seriously ill. Only upon Jesus’ arrival at Bethany do we hear both Martha and Mary express their disappointment and rebuke, over God’s timing, and Jesus’ delay. Little do they know that God has a much better plan here. How often in our own lives are we impatient for God to do something? Little do we realize that God is trying to draw us closer to Him, as well as help us grow in patience and self-control. These valuable life lessons are what Karon Phillips Goodman calls “waiting purposefully”.

Waiting purposefully begins with turning to God, just as Mary and Martha do in sending word to Jesus. It’s not always easy to turn to God. We can be hindered by guilt or shame, or too focused on doing our own thing. It’s not always easy to listen to God, especially when we’re anxious, distressed, or fearful. We like to believe we’re in control, although we’re not. The gift of self-control is essentially letting go of trying to control our lives. We cannot let go without God’s help, nor do we even realize that God is in control, unless we take the time to focus on God and listen. When Jesus and the disciples hear the bad news about Lazarus’ illness, the disciples have a hard time moving beyond their anxious and literal responses. They don’t want to go back to Judea, because they fear for their lives. In fact, they’ve just fled from there under threat of being stoned to death. Courageous Thomas looks death in the face and decides that he would rather die with Jesus, than live without Him. On a spiritual level, Thomas’ willingness to die to self in order to gain life in Christ is the mark of a true disciple. Ironically, it is Jesus’ gift of life to Lazarus as a sign of God’s glory, and His own identity as God’s Son, that precipitates the events leading to His death on the cross, for the life of the world. In the meantime, Mary and Martha’s waiting room is one of pain and grief. They don’t know that God is about to reveal the glory of life in Christ, which is to live our

resurrection lives in the present, even as we look to the future with hope in the gift of everlasting life in Him.

Given that God's timing is entirely in God's hands, we might also be wondering whether our prayers really matter or make a difference. They do – although not always in ways that we understand. At this point in our Lenten journey I pray that our trust and faith in God's steadfast love is a given. Such that we are confident that prayer is essential to our relationship with God in Christ Jesus. We also know that God is not a kind of cosmic vending machine, but gives us what we *need*, when we need it. Jesus confirms our understanding of the importance of prayer, when He prays to God the Father, saying, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.... for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." This is a prayer of thanksgiving for the glory about to be revealed in the resuscitation of Lazarus. God hears all our prayers: those of intercession and thanksgiving, those of adoration, praise and worship, prayers of offering, and prayers of confession. As Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, "Pray without ceasing".

"Unbind him, and let him go," Jesus commands. The power of resurrection is available now in our own lives and relationships. Prayer and thanksgiving are ways in which we are set free, released from our own grave clothes and blessed with new life. As a community of faith, we support and strengthen all who are entering new life. We help remove the grave clothes of self-doubt, isolation or oppression. We tear away the wrappings of fear and anxiety, loss and grief. Jesus calls us all to move forward into new life and a closer relationship with Him. The waiting room of our Lenten journey is the gift of time to spend in reflection listening to discern how God is calling us into new life. Our spiritual growth depends on taking time to discern what is binding us to the world, tripping us up, or covering our eyes and ears. For some of us it may mean seeking and accepting help to become free. To be released is the same as to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." To experience the freedom of forgiveness we must accept the gift for ourselves – however unworthy we might feel – and give the gift of forgiveness to others. Relinquishing our feelings of unworthiness is another aspect of the gift of self-control. Jesus died for our sins, and the sins of the whole world – no exclusions, no exceptions. Giving up that facet of our controlling tendencies helps us to discover that forgiveness is a major part of our healing in Christ, as well as our salvation. Accepting and giving forgiveness is part of dying to self as we become more alive in Christ. In our unbinding we're also invited to determine what parts of our lives we need to shed like dirty grave clothes in order to wear the robe of righteousness in Christ. What stones do we need to push aside to emerge from the darkness of the tomb into the Light of God's grace and abundant life in Christ?

Waiting purposefully helps us to know God's desires for us. As a continuation of Jesus' mission of reconciliation, we are each called to set free those who are tied to the world, and need help to find freedom in Christ. We are co-creators and participants in Christ's mission to reconcile the whole world to God in Him. God has a purpose for each of our lives in fulfilling this mission. When we seek Him in prayer, He will grant us patience to see His work unfold. The Holy Spirit blesses us with self-control, so that we are free to be agents of Christ's boundless love, to the glory of God's name. In God's time, all things are revealed to us. Faith begins with the words, "Lord, I believe." Our faith and trust in God also grow with the words, "Lord, I believe" through all the seasons of our lives.

Amen.