

A Sermon for 5Lent

Sunday, April 6, 2014 – John 11:1-45

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I find Lent to be a very unsettling time. Not upsetting. Unsettling.

It's not the whole sin and repentance thing – although perhaps it is supposed to be. We know, don't we, if only in our heart of hearts, that we are flawed and broken – that those things “done and left undone” are never far from our conscious thoughts – that even in the knowing of our sins we just keep on doing – saying – living the same hurtful, selfish, stupid little things over and over. And yet that is not what is unsettling for me about Lent.

No, it's this...I think there is no time in the cycle of our church life where the stark reality of God incarnate – Jesus both fully human and fully divine – is so strong as it is in the season of Lent. And I don't know about you, but I don't find this easy to understand. Every year our Lenten journey begins yet again with the reminder that *we* are but dust, and to dust we shall return. And we walk with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and we see him tired, and impatient, and angry, and grieving. And we see him compassionate, and loving, and life-giving. We watch him spit – spit! – into the dust to bring sight to a blind man. We hear him shout at his dead friend to come out of the tomb. We know where he is going, and we know what will happen when he gets there. We know he will suffer, and die on a cross that was more than the death penalty – it was torture. We know he will be raised again. He IS God. Man, and God. Fully human...fully divine. Beyond our comprehension. Beyond our understanding. Unsettling...

I want to believe Jesus was fully human. Well, I do believe it...but we *need* to believe it because we need the reassurance that Jesus – that God – knows what it is like to be us. Knows what it means, day in and day out, to be imperfect. What it means, day in and day out, to make mistakes and get in our own way and fall off the path we are so determined to tread. We want God to know not just that we hurt, but how that hurting feels. To know not just that we are ashamed, but how devastating that shame can feel. To know not just that we keep asking for forgiveness, but how humiliated we feel to be asking again...and again...and again.

When we feel joy, or contentment, love, or deep peace, it is not hard to imagine that God understands. God is, after all, a God of loving kindness, of tenderness and great joy. It is when our fully human hearts and minds and souls are dark – with sorrow, with anger, with despair, with emptiness – that we wonder how God *could* understand. And that is when we feel alone.

And Jesus began to weep...

Today's narrative from the Gospel of John tells one more familiar story of Jesus as man, Jesus as God. I remember vividly when I was a child in Sunday School – back in the olden days – back in the days of the King James Bible – sitting on the edge of my seat, hardly able to contain myself, hardly able to keep my hand from flying in the air for that one anticipated trivia question. What is the shortest verse in the Bible? Every hand went up waving – pick me, pick me – everyone hoping to answer, “Jesus wept.” Not only was it a sure fire answer...it *meant* something. We were of an age when we had graduated from “Jesus wants me for a sunbeam” to our first inklings of who Jesus was – in history, in the Bible, in our own lives. Jesus, we learned, was a man whose friend had died, and it made Jesus so sad that he cried – just like we did.

We also knew that Jesus made his dead friend live again. Not so easy, that part, especially at a time when the death of grandparents, baby brothers and sisters, pets, and, sometimes, even *our* friends was giving us our first experiences of sorrow and loss. Why could Jesus raise his friend from the dead and not ours? How was that fair?

The subtleties – and the enormities – of the gift of life were bigger than we could comprehend back then. And, I am not embarrassed to say, bigger than we can truly comprehend even now. The gift of life is a gift from God – a gift *only* God can give. It was God who brought the dry bones of Israel out of the grave and restored a nation to life. It was God for whom the psalmist's soul waited – for the life-restoring redemption of forgiveness. Paul told the Romans it was God who breathed life into the minds and souls of those in whom God's Spirit dwelled. And it was Jesus, fully divine, who showed forth God's glory by giving life to his friend...not for effect...not to prove something...not to bring forth a miracle...but as a sign – a sign of the life-giving power of God's love.

Life *is* from God.

Life is from God, and with God, and in God. Oh, we can live from birth until death – we can *survive* from birth until death without sparing a thought to the Source of this gift. We can call ourselves happy, and fulfilled, and successful with no thought to God at all. We can look at the world around us, fraught with suffering, growing fat with greed or starving from famine, worshipping any number of idols – and we can ask, “Where is God in all *this*?” Look around any day, anywhere, and it is hard, hard, hard to comprehend.

And we wait...just as Mary and Martha waited even when it was too late...just as the Israelites waited until the bones were long dry...just as the psalmist's soul would wait forever. We wait. Not because we have nothing better to do. Not because we have no other choice. No, we wait because in giving us life, God gave us *hope*. In giving us life, God gave God's son to be one of us. In giving us life, God gave us one another to come together in community – to share love and pain, hardship and plenty, encouragement and caution. God gave us one another to do as Jesus did – to

weep with one another and to share God's life-giving love with one another and with the world.

Lent is unsettling. It is a time we remember that it was God made man who died on that cross. It is the time we are reminded that we are, each of us, but one – and yet we are, each of us, part of a greater whole – and that together we are called to life not only for ourselves but for every brother and sister and every good thing in God's creation. In Lent we look inward, but must never forget to *live* outward. We see Jesus heal, and welcome, and offer hope, and bring the dead back to life. And we see Jesus weep, as we weep. Over and over and over again, this man who walked the earth as we walk – who, when you stop to think of it, breathed in the very air we breathe (amazing, isn't it?) – this man gave life, with love. Life and love that is ours for the taking, without even asking. Life and love that we, as a community of faith in the One whose gift was given, can give away with reckless abandon and radical generosity, for the Source never dies.

When you come to the table this morning, carry in your heart and in your outstretched hands someone who waits for the reassurance of God's gift of life. Bring with you to holy communion a loved one who suffers; a man or woman or child from Oso, Washington whose life has been changed forever by a forty-foot wall of mud; bring an enemy, whose opinions you find abhorrent and whose lifestyle you reject; bring a little boy or girl from Galena, who gets a backpack from the Food Pantry every Friday filled with food, so that child is assured of at least one meal on Saturday and Sunday; bring someone near death, whose only hope is for a peaceful end. Bring them with you...care for them and pray for them and love them for even those few moments, and when the gift of the bread of life is placed in your hands, share it with them in your hearts.

Lent is, indeed, unsettling. Probably *not* so much because Jesus fully human and Jesus fully divine is too hard to understand. We weren't always meant to understand – it is, after all, the Holy Mystery – the bedrock of faith. And faith speaks this truth: God alone gives life. Life in all its joy and sorrow – life in its earthiness and its true grace – life in times of trial and times of blessing. Life as a vessel for love in all its myriad facets and expressions. Love *in* community and *as* community. Love as the web of energy that radiates from the heart of Christ's body, the church. Love as the thrumming, pulsing bond that holds us together, and the force that sends us out – to care and share, to laugh and cry, to give and receive, to suffer and to heal in the living world where we all breathe the same air Jesus breathed with Mary and Martha at the tomb.

The only unsettling question is what *we* choose to do with such blessing....