

Sermon – Fifth Sunday of Lent

Scripture Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *Jesus offers us eternal and abundant life that begins here and now – but he also meets us in the broken places and grieves with us. To follow him is to embrace that life, which is strong enough to weep with those who weep and which looks for Jesus in the most difficult places.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. This sickness does not lead to death...
 - a. Not the end of the story
 - i. Alternate translation – Greek is literally “the sickness is not to/unto death”; I grew up with the NIV: This sickness will not end in death
 - ii. Helpful reminder in the midst of the difficult passages that we all face at times – that our stories do not end in darkness.
 - b. Jesus has a greater plan and purpose
 - i. Strange decision not to go to Lazarus while he yet lives – clearly Mary and Martha expect Jesus to come, and yet he makes this pronouncement about the sickness not leading to death and then delays for two days.
 - ii. When he does go, it is worth facing danger and maybe even death
 - iii. Final / seventh sign of John’s gospel
 - iv. Jesus has dominion even over death itself
 - c. Resurrection isn’t just about life after death
 - i. This sign switches up the usual pattern in John’s gospel; typically the signs are structured like the healing of the blind man last week – miraculous demonstration, followed by dialogue and discourse to unpack and explain the sign.
 - ii. This week, Jesus sets things up in advance; there is a lot of dialogue and discourse preceding the sign, which doesn’t even occur until the last couple of verses in today’s passage.
 - iii. This isn’t just about demonstrating power, or about a post-mortem compensation for the challenges of this life.
 - iv. That is what Martha expects (along with Mary and many of the faithful Jews of Jesus’ time), but Jesus is challenging that expectation – verses 21-27
 - d. “I am the resurrection and the life...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”
 - i. Jesus is offering life that begins here and now, in this world. It will go on beyond this world, but it can begin here.
 - ii. This life is about more than just struggling to survive, about more than seeking security and prosperity. It is an invitation to joy and peace and hope and purpose.

- iii. This life is a contrast to the powers that seem to control the world today – it is about seeking justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with our God. Like we see Jesus do in our passage today, it is even willing to challenge the violent powers.
 - iv. This life is not about hiding who you are, but about freedom and community; it's no accident that the queer community has found a lot of hope in this story – in Jesus' command to Lazarus to *come out*, and to the call to unbind him. The eternal life that Jesus offers is one of freedom and authenticity.
2. But what about the sicknesses that do end in death?
- a. Recognize the Messy Truth
 - i. Many people are not given the opportunity to live and enjoy life here on earth, but face illnesses or injuries that do lead to death, cutting short their time.
 - ii. Others experience life altering loss, watching loved ones taken away and being left to ask why they were not deemed worthy of this life that Jesus offers.
 - b. Significance of the space that this passage makes for grief
 - i. While Jesus does seem to have a plan and purpose here, and engages in dialogue with Martha, his response is different when confronted with the overwhelming grief of Mary.
 - ii. Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit” (we are told not once, but twice) and “deeply moved”. He also weeps at the tomb of his friend, even though he knows what he is about to do.
 - iii. The passage spends more time on this grief than it does on the resurrection itself. Why place so much emphasis on grief?
 - c. *What Remains When Nothing Can Be Done:*
 - i. I've been thinking a lot about a story I read a couple of weeks ago, about a couple who rejoice to be expecting a new baby, only to learn that this unborn child had anencephaly – a condition where the baby develops without most of it's brain and skull. <https://mbird.com/suffering/what-remains-when-nothing-can-be-done/> Quote: “There is no medical path forward...Does a life that cannot be fixed, extended, or made productive still mean something?”
 - ii. For many, this would be a tragedy to move on from as quickly as possible. Terminate the fetus, grieve the loss, and move on. But this couple made a different choice – they chose to carry the baby, to wait in the grief – but to also embrace the love they felt for this child. “They named their son Alexander, meaning protector of mankind...protecting us – not from suffering but from the assumption that meaning must be earned, that a life must justify itself, that worth is secured by capacity, outcome, or endurance.”
 - iii. To be clear, I would not ever dare to tell a family dealing with anencephaly that this is the path they ought to take. While I do see unborn children as having life and value, I do not want our government restricting access to abortion; I recognize that sometimes it is the best option available to a person, and that the decision should be left to the woman and her doctor and those she trusts to invite into the situation.
 - iv. But, at least in this case, something incredible came out of this family choosing to carry their dying, unborn baby for as long as possible; in their choice they embraced grief, but also love. By trusting that Alexander's life has value and that he is known and deeply loved by God, they experienced the fullness of life.

- d. Our call to grieve with those who grieve
 - i. So, I wonder if part of what this Gospel passage has to teach us – with its insistence that resurrection life is not just about the future but is for us to experience here and now – is the power of meeting people in their grief.
 - ii. We too often want to help people move on, or to explain away the pain with shallow sentiments: “they’re in a better place now” or “God wanted them in heaven more than on earth” or “everything happens for a reason”. But such words are too often cheap and cause more harm. Please, if you take nothing else today, remember that these kinds of “answers” are not generally helpful.
 - iii. Instead, perhaps we are called to have the courage to weep with those who weep, and to recognize that pain and loss are an unavoidable part of the life that Jesus offers – even if they are not the end of the story. Perhaps by waiting with people in the grief, we make space to recognize the presence of the weeping Jesus with us in the most difficult and messy parts of life.
- e. So, as we draw near to the end of this Lenten season, let us remember that we follow Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life. In following him, we are offered abundant and eternal life – life that is not limited to what happens after death, but that calls us to freedom and authenticity and hope and mercy and love even here, in our messy and broken world. And, in following him, we are called into the places of pain and grief – not to fix things or to insist that people move on from grief, but to trust that the God of life meets us and grieves with us and helps us to make meaning even in the most difficult of times.

Amen.