

**Sermon: March 29, 2020 – John 11: 1-45 (Lent V)**

**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Two words that emerge from today's passage from John are **presence**, and **absence**.

When my Mom was growing up, her Sunday School teacher liked to have Bible "memory verse" quizzes. When the teacher quoted chapter and verse, Mom said she struggled a bit, but when the students were able to name the chapter and verse themselves and then recite it, Mom had a go-to verse that was a sure winner, and it was in today's reading. John 11:35, "Jesus wept," the shortest verse in all of scripture.

While my first connection with that scripture is my Mom's childhood story, those two words tell us so much about the presence of Jesus in our hardest times. Given that the gospel of John repeatedly presents Jesus as one who manifests the glory of the high and holy God, it says something very profound that Jesus would weep when he comes face to face with Mary's grief at a dear brother's death. If we are caught up in understandings of God as being all-powerful, unchangeable, perfect, above all these things that happen on planet earth, the notion of God being so present to our lives and our losses that God would weep for us, can change one's whole notion of God. To picture a weeping Jesus in this scene at Bethany, is to accept the depth of God's connection each time a hard diagnosis is received, each time injustice punishes the poor yet again, each time a species goes extinct. For those of you who have known God's presence in your pain or grieving, these words confirm what you know from experience.

In this scene from John 11, Jesus is also present, to the spiritual wonderings of both Martha and Mary. Elsewhere in scripture Martha has been shown as the busy one who takes care of what needs doing, while her sister Mary is praised for her more theological approach to life. Yet it's Martha who meets Jesus first on the path to talk theology, about life and death and where Jesus fits in all that.

Jesus stays with Martha, not denying or deflecting her thoughts or her emotions but engaging them. Thirty-plus years ago, our seminary professor, Dr. Jim Martin was teaching a course on the gospel of John, a course that left me both enlightened and baffled. The day he was delving into this passage, he read this exchange between Martha and Jesus aloud to us, ending with verse 26: "Jesus said to her, '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?'" Then Jim Martin stopped reading, looked straight at us students and said, "well, DO YOU?"

That was a really tough, important question for those of us inclined to an academic faith, a spirituality that first and foremost needs to make sense. In the gospel of John, Martha says yes to this question, and our professor wanted us to get clear on our answer to that before heading off to the towns and villages we would be serving. It may also have been the first time that it really sunk in, that the way that Jesus engaged these characters long ago and far away is the same engagement we have with the Divine here, now, today. When Jesus engages Martha's theological questions, and seeks her answers, it's a promise that our questions will be heard and taken seriously, too.

This continues, when Jesus sees Mary, who cuts right to the chase. She, like her sister, makes Jesus know that (a) she believes he could have prevented this and (b) he didn't, and as her emotions intertwine with his, Jesus is moved not only to tears, but also to action. Mary doesn't filter her emotions, she brings them to Jesus and something happens. He was present to Martha's questions and now, to Mary's emotions. Take note of that next time you figure you need to carry heavy emotional burdens on your own. Through the gift of people in your life willing to be present in your need and, yes, through prayer, contemplation, going deep in spirit, you are never truly alone.

And finally, Jesus goes to Lazarus. In a rather gruesome scene, Lazarus, complete with the stench of death, is called by Jesus to get out of that tomb – and he does, but with some difficulty because he was all wrapped up in burial bandages. There are a few ways to translate what Jesus says in reference to Lazarus in verse 44, but I like what the New Revised Standard Version says: "Unbind him, and let him go."

The action suggested by those words, has changed people's lives for generation upon generation. People whose lives were bound by something – by addiction, by the demeaning words or actions of someone who held power over them, by fears and anxieties run rampant – have experienced Jesus as liberator. Not just the one who promises us a life that transcends death, but the one who sets us free from oppression practically, tangibly, right here and now. The love of God, embodied and expressed by Jesus, is a power that unbinds us from the things that diminish life, whatever those things may be. Jesus opens the possibility of new life, to Lazarus, to me, to us, to you.

I said at the beginning of this message, that there were two words, presence and absence, that arise from this reading, and so far I've only talked about presence. But the theme of absence is significant, and difficult.

Jesus, according to this story, knows that Lazarus is in his final days, yet dilly-dallies for two more days in place before going forward. It's not like he would be ambivalent about being in Bethany – Lutheran pastor and scholar Brian Stoffregen points out that this was like a second home to Jesus – Mary and Martha and Lazarus are described as ones whom Jesus loved, and their home, Bethany was where he prepared himself for the triumphal entry we know as Palm Sunday. No, Jesus needed no convincing to go to this place but he delays, and Martha and Mary are well aware of it. The author of this gospel sort of turns away from the story and gives us readers a big loud stage whisper, "this is so God's glory can be shown" but frankly, that rings hollow for me. I'm with Martha and Mary: Jesus was needed and he was not there.

Those moments – those dark nights of the soul – are so difficult to experience, yet are such a hard, painful part of the human journey. In the midst of chaos or confusion or betrayal, in the midst of the environmental crisis and other justice issues that haven't gone away just because we're fully engaged with something else, we look at the heavens and wonder where God is in all of this, or we look at one another and wonder how humanity could be so foolish and mean-spirited. When we acknowledge life's hard, bleak moments of nothingness, the sense that God and meaning are absent, we are drawn to love one another. In those acts of presence, we remind one

another that the strength of caring, attentive love defines God and defines us. In the midst of absence, there has to be presence.

In these days, we live with a new and strange rhythm of absence and presence. We live in a state of enforced absence from one another, necessary for the sake of public health. This past Tuesday, faith community leaders from across Alberta were invited to a conference call with the Premier, the Minister of Health, and the Chief Medical Officer. One heartfelt question came from a person whose religious tradition has very clear expectations for timely, personal funeral gatherings and wondered what to do now. And the reality is, a gathering is a gathering, so even for a funeral there would be 2 metres distance, no touching, and no more than 50 – amended now to 15 – in attendance. I can scarcely imagine what it would be like to suffer a death in the family at this time, when we can't gather and hug and stand close and swap stories, and my heart goes out to those who are facing that in these days. During these days when flattening the COVID curve by staying apart is the first gift we give one another, absence is a strong and inescapable factor in our daily lives.

But what we are learning – and need to not forget later on – is all those other ways that we can be present to one another. As we get creative in connecting to one another, we can redefine community, in positive, interconnected ways that could well change the shape of life once we're past this. Now is a time we are discovering or rediscovering the importance of the well timed phone call, or email or text. We can't share physical space with one another but we can connect in virtual space through a myriad of apps on our phones or tablets or iPads. We can't gather for meetings or chats over tea, but we are now learning how to meet with others using video conferencing, to see one another's faces, to hear one another's voices, to discuss, to jest, to feel part of something non-isolated.

In a situation where physical absence from one another is a "must", we also need to demonstrate that absence doesn't get the final word. Presence does. Worry and loneliness don't get the final word. Presence does. Solitary confinement doesn't get the final word. Presence does, even if it is only "virtual."

What started out as a story of absence – Jesus, absent from his beloved friends Martha and Mary and Lazarus – unfolds as a story of powerful presence. Liberation from that which binds arises, even in the face of death. Absence is a real thing, but Presence defines who we are as those called in Christ to share love, and to be love.

In this intimate scene in Bethany, in the ways you are present to your neighbours in need, God's gift of love takes human form. Amen, and Amen.

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