

SUNDAY MARCH 29, 2020

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Welcome to the fifth Sunday in Lent. After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river, the Bible tells us that He was driven into the desert for 40 days by the Spirit, where he was tempted by the devil. Lent is a season, a 40-day journey, that is meant for us to reflect on desert times in hopes of redemption and resurrection. I don't know about you, but I sometimes find it hard to truly prepare myself for the season of Lent. It's often difficult to stop long enough and reflect deeply enough so as to really experience the benefits of repentance and sacrificial giving, self-denial and prolonged prayer. But now, suddenly, we find ourselves being driven into a desert time of our own, when things have been turned upside down; the world as we knew has been stripped from us; the needs of others are ever before us and continually growing; and all of us have been praying without ceasing. It isn't pleasant in any way to be driven into a desert experience. But here we are, whether we like it or not. And the temptations and the frustrations are palpable. But even so, may we never forget that God dwells with us and that God empowers us, even in the darkest pits, or in the deepest valleys, or in the driest deserts of life. God is with us, and God will keep us, and God has promised us renewal and resurrection. Lent reminds us that life will often take us to the foot of the cross, but the story always ends with an empty tomb. Hold on to God's promise and share it generously with others.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we find ourselves caught in a desert time that came as a surprise to many; leaving us with feelings of uncertainty, confusion, anxiety and fear. Enable us to pour out our concerns freely to you, trusting that you will lead and comfort us along the way. Give us courage in the face of uncertainty; love in the face of fear; and hope in the face of an unknown path ahead. Strengthen us, O Lord, and give us peace, so that we might sing until the dawn at the end of our journey. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

SONG: 'Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song as I Journey'

READINGS:

A reading from Psalm 130...

¹Out | of the depths

I cry to | you, O LORD;

²**O LORD, | hear my voice!**

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my | supplication.

³If you were to keep watch | over sins,

O LORD, | who could stand?

⁴**Yet with you | is forgiveness,**

in order that you | may be feared. R

⁵I wait for you, O LORD; | my soul waits;

in your word | is my hope.

**⁶My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch | for the morning,
more than those who keep watch | for the morning.**

⁷O Israel, wait for the LORD, for with the LORD there is | steadfast love;
with the LORD there is plen- | teous redemption.

**⁸For the LORD shall | redeem Israel
from | all their sins. R**

THE GOSPEL:

The Gospel reading this morning comes from the Gospel of John, the eleventh chapter...

Glory to you, O Lord.

11 A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. ² This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair.^[a] Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. ³ So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."

⁴ But when Jesus heard about it he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this." ⁵ So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, ⁶ he stayed where he was for the next two days. ⁷ Finally, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea."

⁸ But his disciples objected. "Rabbi," they said, "only a few days ago the people^[b] in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?"

⁹ Jesus replied, "There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. ¹⁰ But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light." ¹¹ Then he said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up."

¹² The disciples said, "Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!" ¹³ They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died.

¹⁴ So he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ And for your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there, for now you will really believe. Come, let's go see him."

¹⁶ Thomas, nicknamed the Twin,^[c] said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too—and die with Jesus."

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was only a few miles^[d] down the road from

Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. ²⁰ When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house.

²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ “Yes,” Martha said, “he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. ^[e] Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?”

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God.” ²⁸ Then she returned to Mary. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, “The Teacher is here and wants to see you.” ²⁹ So Mary immediately went to him.

³⁰ Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. ³¹ When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus’s grave to weep. So they followed her there. ³² When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, ^[f] and he was deeply troubled. ³⁴ “Where have you put him?” he asked them.

They told him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Then Jesus wept. ³⁶ The people who were standing nearby said, “See how much he loved him!” ³⁷ But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” ³⁸ Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. ³⁹ “Roll the stone aside,” Jesus told them.

But Martha, the dead man’s sister, protested, “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.” ⁴⁰ Jesus responded, “Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?” ⁴¹ So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. ⁴² You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent

me.”⁴³ Then Jesus shouted, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, “Unwrap him and let him go!”⁴⁵ Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen.

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON: ‘SURPRISE’

The past couple of weeks have felt like an eternity – at least for me. I find it discomfoting to consider how quickly things have changed. It was only two weeks ago that we gathered as a community to hold our annual meeting; reflecting on a year gone by and considering what lies ahead. Few of us imagined at the time our present circumstance. It has come as a bit of a surprise.

But to be honest, I have never been all that fond of surprise. For the most part I like things that are planned, ordered and predictable. And I know I’m not alone.

Even those who like surprise are not finding much joy in our current situation. Today’s circumstances give us a bitter taste of surprise.

But there is still some sweetness here. I was reminded of this while watching a Ted Talk this week by a young academic by the name of Tania Luna. Tania is a psychology professor at Hunter College and has made it her professional focus to understand and teach the science of surprise. Like some of us, Tania used to hate surprises, but has come to the realization that surprise is an effective means to explore the unknown; to lead deep and joyful lives; and to have a meaningful impact on others.

Surprise, she contends, does a few very important things. First, it stops us in our tracks. It breaks us from our regular rhythms and reorients us - if only for a moment. Second, it plugs us into the moment. It has a way of wiping all other things away - and draws all of our attention towards that which is right in front of us. Third, it intensifies our emotions. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to be surprised and not be left with a heart that beats a little bit faster. And finally, surprise loosens our grip on certainty, and leaves us to simply wonder.

According to the professor, what we decide to do in response to anything that surprises us, is of utmost importance. We really have two main options before us in response to surprise. The first is to dismiss or explain it away. The second is to let surprise sink in and allow it to change your perspective.

In other words, surprise comes in that brief moment when something previously unknown to us is revealed. It uncovers something mysterious or new. And we respond in one of two ways. We either say, ‘I don’t know - and I don’t like it’ or we say, ‘I don’t know - but I wonder’.

Life becomes richer, professor Luna suggests, when we actively choose to be people of wonder. To be vulnerable; to willingly take risks in life; and to decide to remain in the tension of the unknown. When we learn to say, with comfort and with hope - I don’t know, but I Wonder.

It's a similar message that is revealed in the pages of Scripture. We have seen it played out, again and again, in the Gospel readings during our season of Lent. Readings that are filled with surprise. Readings that reveal encounters with Jesus that turn peoples' world upside down.

During the second week of Lent we read about Nicodemus, a prominent leader in Jerusalem, who has come to meet with Jesus in secret, in the shadows of night. He comes in hopes of reinforcing what he already knows or has come to believe, but what he receives from Jesus comes as a complete surprise. Jesus begins to speak of being born again - or born from above. Nicodemus doesn't know what Jesus is talking about, and he doesn't like it. His initial reaction is to ask a question of his own; a question that in his mind is completely unanswerable. 'How can someone be born again' he asks, 'if they have already grown old. Can they enter their mother's womb a second time and be born?' But Jesus continues to speak. He speaks of the wind and the workings of the Spirit. Nicodemus' is dumbfounded. He doesn't know about the things of which Jesus' speaks - but he wonders.

In week three, we encountered the Samaritan woman at the well. It too is a story of surprise. The surprise begins with Jesus being at the well in the first place. Men were not known to collect water in the day. But Jesus sits with the woman at the well, and they engage in conversation. As they are talking about thirst - Jesus starts in about the living water that only He can give. Water that will quench one's thirst forever. The woman doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. And besides, how could Jesus offer her water of any kind without any bucket in hand? But the ultimate surprise comes as the conversation continues. As they talk, Jesus reveals a knowledge about the woman that takes her by surprise. He knows things about her that she has kept secret.

How does this stranger, who she has just met, know so much about her? She doesn't know who Jesus is - but she begins to wonder.

Last week, we read the story of a man blind from birth. It, too, is a story filled with surprise. The disciples are amazed that Jesus restores sight by placing mud on a blind man's eyes. The people in the community are confused. They can't understand how a man born blind could now suddenly see. The man's parents know it's their son, but they have no explanation. The Pharisees, who are beginning to hear stories of a miraculous healing on the sabbath are alarmed. They don't know how it happened - but they don't like it. And the man born blind is himself thoroughly surprised. He doesn't know who Jesus is and he doesn't know how it all came to be. But what he does know is that he was once blind, but now he can see. He doesn't know - but he wonders.

And then in our reading today, we meet Mary and Martha in a moment of considerable suffering. Their brother - the one whom Jesus loved - has died. What surprises the sisters is that Jesus takes over two days in coming. He is only a short distance away when word comes to him that Lazarus is unwell and failing fast. But Jesus doesn't respond immediately. He waits for two days before even beginning the journey to Bethany. Martha expresses her surprise and her disappointment with Jesus. 'If only you had been here' she says. 'If only you had come right away our brother would not have died.' 'Martha' Jesus responds 'your brother will rise again'. 'I know' Martha replies, but this does not take away the grief that she feels in the moment.

Reading between the lines, one can almost imagine what is going through Martha's mind. "I know what Jesus says is true - but still don't like it".

As the story unfolds, Jesus is taken by the people to the place where Lazarus' has been buried.

Having the stone rolled away, Jesus prays and then calls for Lazarus to come out. To the surprise of all who are gathered, Lazarus emerges from the tomb. At first, the people stand in utter amazement; stopped in their tracks. But then Jesus calls them into action. 'Take off the burial clothes', Jesus tells them, 'unbind him and set him free.' The people don't know what has happened - but they are filled with wonder.

As we consider these stories of Jesus' life and ministry – especially in light of our current circumstances – may we be comforted in knowing that Jesus works well in moments of surprise. When we find ourselves stopped in our tracks; plunged into a difficult moment; and filled with intense emotion, Jesus has a way of drawing close and speaking words of wisdom.

And in these divine moments of holy surprise, we are offered a choice. We can simply dismiss them or try to explain them away. Or we can do the better thing - and admit that we don't know and we need help.

We don't always know what God is up to. We don't always know what God has planned. We don't know where the wind of the Spirit comes from or where goes; we don't always know from where the living water will come; we don't know what might cause us to see things differently or more clearly. And we don't know when the next opportunity will come when Jesus will invite us to participate in his work and ministry; to unbind another and to set them free.

We don't know - but may we always be people who wonder. A people both ready and willing to be surprised.

Amen.

Please join with me in our words of faith, as we find them in the Apostles' Creed

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen**

Prayers of the People

We continue with our prayers, as a community of faith. I will pray 'Hear us, O God' and invite you to respond 'Your mercy is great'...

Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

God of life, bind your faithful people into one body. Enliven the church with your Spirit and bless the work of those who work for its renewal. Accomplish your work of salvation in us and through us, for the sake of the world. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, you love the whole world and you grieve when creation suffers. Restore polluted lands and waterways. Heal areas of the world ravaged by storms, floods, wildfires, droughts, or other natural disasters. In this uncertain time there are many things that seem wrong. However, we rejoice that this time of pause has already produced cleaner air and clearer waters; reminders that you are always making things new. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, show redemption to all who watch and wait with eager expectation: those longing for wars to cease, those waiting for immigration paperwork to finalize, those waiting in isolation for Covid-19 results, and those who are experiencing serious symptoms of the virus and battling for their lives. Come quickly with your hope and give to all a deep sense of peace. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, you weep with those who grieve. Unbind all who are held captive by anxiety, despair, or pain. Fill us with compassion and empathy for those around us who are struggling. May we find new and appropriate ways of loving our neighbor in difficult circumstances. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, you are our resurrection. We remember all those who have died and trust that, in you, they will live again. Breathe new life into our dry bones, that we, too, might live with you forever. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Saviour and Lord.

Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Pray with me the prayer Jesus taught:

**'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as is heaven
Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours
Now and forever, Amen.**

BLESSING

*The God of steadfastness and encouragement
grant you to live in harmony with one another,
in accordance with Christ Jesus.*

Amen.

*The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Amen.

The God of all grace ✝ bless you now and forever.

Amen.

SENDING SONG: 'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus'