**April 6, 2014 – 5th Sunday of Lent**

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Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

These are the beginning lines of one of my favorite poems by John Donne, in which he personifies Death in order to tell it that it’s not the last power in the universe.

This brings us to our Gospel reading today, which tells the story of one of the most famous of all of Jesus miracles, the raising of Lazarus. As I said last week, this is the seventh and last of the signs in John’s Gospel. And like a lot of the miracles in John, this one is mostly observed indirectly through the eyes of those around Jesus.

The story starts out with Jesus and his disciples having escaped to the other side of the Jordan River from Jerusalem to escape arrest and stoning for what the Jewish officials considered to be blasphemy. While they’re there they receive word that one of Jesus’ dear friends is very ill. Jesus decides to wait a couple of days before heading back across the Jordan to see Lazarus.

Lazarus’ illness, and ultimately his death, is an opportunity to glorify God, he says. I have to say, I had a little trouble with this idea. Last week I said that God was off the hook on the subject of making a person blind from birth in order to have someone for Jesus to perform a miracle on years later.

But here, the text out and out says that Jesus waited around for a couple of days on purpose. Did he want to wait until the stoners in Jerusalem put down their rocks or found someone new to attack? Or did he, for the sake of drama, want Lazarus to get a bit worse before going to heal him? Or did he, as some commentaries have said, want to wait until it was clear that Lazarus was truly dead before resurrecting him because in Jewish tradition, the soul is thought to have left the body after three days. The text doesn’t say, but whatever his rationale was, it seems to me to be a little cold.

The priest in me sort of gets that, and I can even trot out all the correct stained glass language if necessary to explain it. But the human being in me is a little pissed off. What about poor Mary and Martha, and all those mourners who came over from Jerusalem? What about Lazarus himself? For all my fancy book-larnin’, I’m at a loss sometimes to understand why God does some things. I guess that the glory of God isn’t necessarily about our immediate comfort.

But just when we think that God is at his most unknowable, we get the shortest verse in the entire New Testament – Jesus wept. The shortest and maybe the sweetest. Jesus, the inscrutable Logos, the Son of God, weeps for his friend. And maybe not just for Lazarus, whom he knew was going to be alive soon, but also for Mary and Martha, and the rest of the mourners gathered around, and for all of humanity, whose short lives are often marked by sorrow and loss and tears.

At that moment, Jesus – God – is at his most human and vulnerable. At that moment, he is truly part of the community of mourners and part of the family of Mary and Martha. At that moment, he is truly one of us.

As we’ll hear in the Passion Gospel next week and again on Good Friday, and as we say in our Creeds, Jesus suffered. He certainly suffered physical pain and degradation, but the Gospels make it clear that he suffered emotional pain as well. He suffered when he was betrayed. He suffered when he was surrounded by sleeping disciples, though he had begged them to stay awake with him. He suffered doubt and fear in the Garden.

Suffering is a part of life. Some days it’s so hard that it’s all we can do to get out of bed. But it’s somehow comforting to know that God truly knows what it means to suffer in life – not just because God is all knowing, but because he emptied himself to become human, to suffer, to know loss, and to die.

The Greek word for suffering is *pascho*, from which we get the word Paschal, as in Paschal Lamb, and the word passion with its derivation, compassion – which means to suffer with. Jesus suffered for us, but also WITH us.

The theology of Lazarus’ resurrection seems pretty straightforward – the completion of the seven signs, and the foreshadowing of Jesus’ own death and resurrection. But maybe the glory of God isn’t only shown by the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead and bringing him back into the arms of his loving family. Maybe the glory of God is also shown in Jesus’ tears and his suffering for his friends.

I don’t pretend to understand why this story unfolds as it does. But I do understand the human emotions that give this story its life. “Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord,” the psalmist writes in today’s psalm. Who hasn’t felt that way at some point in their life? Who hasn’t wordlessly cried out to God out of the depths of despair, or longing, or loneliness?

When Martha and Mary each encounter Jesus, the first thing they say to him is, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” It’s difficult to say what the original intent was behind those words, but to me they have a ring of reproach – a very human response. “Jesus, you let me down. I know you could have cured my brother if you’d gotten here earlier, but you didn’t and now he’s dead.” If we can’t make sense out of senseless tragedy, we try to find someone to blame for it.

And again, the psalmist covers these emotions, this time in Psalm 22 when he writes, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” The psalms are a great place to go if you want to lament. Fully a third of them are despairing cries to God. Even Jesus, himself, in Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts, cries out the first line of Psalm 22 at his crucifixion.

Suffering is the curse, but also in some ways the blessing, of our humanity. Why it’s a curse is obvious – we suffer, we feel sad, we feel abandoned. But it’s a blessing because we aren’t alone in our sadness and anger and loneliness. All humankind, including Jesus, is right there with us.

This is where our communities of faith are so important. Just as Mary and Martha were surrounded and supported by their community after Lazarus died, so should we turn to each other for support in times of tragedy and hardship, as well as in times of celebration. This is especially true when many of our family members are spread out and far away.

God is always there with us – always – just as Jesus was right there with Mary and Martha in their grief. We can absolutely count on that. We, in turn, need to continuously open our hearts to each other in compassion, and we need to make sure we open our doors and those same compassionate hearts to the suffering and needs of the wider community around us. Because to weep with others, and to share their burdens, is to glorify God.

Amen.