Sermon Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A, March 29, 2020 UPMP

*(pandemic sermon, recorded and edited for essay form)*

WELCOME

*God’s Grace to you from United Protestant Church in Morgan Park… a lovely day out there today (eye roll), just around freezing with a couple inches of slush. I brought my swimsuit, and plan on heading outside after worship to work on my tan.*

*It is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the first year of the liturgical calendar. You are at home, as you have been for many days, socially isolating for the sake of the common good. I know many of you would rather be here, sitting in these pews, and I know that this close-up of my face (and witnessing how crooked my nose really is ) isn’t your idea of a Sunday meeting, but still, I invite you, to take this moment, relax your minds and open your hearts and welcome this scripture and reflection.*

*And as we share this online, there’s a quiet hope I have that somebody views this that isn’t familiar with the church, and is presently wondering what kind of people we are. If that is you, know this: the doors of this church are open to anyone (well, except in a pandemic), and we reserve any judgment of class or culture or race or sexuality or behavior all for God… We’re across the spectrum here in lifestyles, values, politics—we go from Bernie to Trump. But…all are welcome. See, we’ve been taught by Jesus that we are a people of Love and that God loves every human soul…and so do we. Or, as the familiar phrase in the United Church of Christ goes: “Jesus didn’t turn people away, neither do we.”*

SCRIPTURE

Our Scripture today is a heaping helping of John, chapter 11. Here these words:

John 11:1-44 (NRSV)

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” 8The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 9Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” 11After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” 12The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” 16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

17When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” 23Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 25Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” 40Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” 45Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Sermon: “WONDER”

Here we have a passage on that journey toward Jerusalem, on that journey toward Palm Sunday, toward the garden, toward betrayal, toward Good Friday, execution…

…and we know this story. We’re familiar with it. And as I said a few weeks ago from the pulpit, we don’t repeat the story because we suspect that anybody might have forgotten it, but because it still amazes is.

God’s work still amazes us. God at work, through Jesus, is the foundation of our faith. It is who we are.

And friends, this is a good time for us to remind ourselves that though we hear this story and embrace these experiences from our history in the Good Book, God is still, today, at work. In every moment. Yes, Friends, all it takes is for you and I to center, and focus on God’s presence, and witness all the ways God is at work…

Put another way: you don’t think miracles are still happening? I don’t think you’re looking hard enough. We are all active participants in God’s present working of miracles, in ways we may not see, and in some ways that we will never see.

I was thinking about this recently, see, in the past week I’ve been doing these crazy updates to my very old computer so there’s a lot of time to sit around and wait for programs to run, and update, etc. So I grabbed a book off the shelf. It was some, what I might call: “heavier theology” (Jon Sobrino from El Salvodor, if you’re curious)—over four hundred pages on approaches to Christology—the kind of stuff I loved to gobble up during seminary. The kind of things this theology geek loves to sit with but honestly seldom ever does any more.

Then, a day later, I read a book review from an old friend that was in the writing program in Nonfiction with me down at Ohio University—he’s doing well, a college professor and this is his fourth book.

Well, sometimes I wonder why God didn’t take me in either of those directions, for surely theology, and essays, are both interests and passions… I wonder why I’m not doing those things so intensely every day. I wonder how different my life could have been.

…and here I’m prone here to seeking blame or justification… *Oh, it was my family, having children, the pursuit of my wife’s career and the sacrifice of mine!* Or blame turns to self-criticism: *I couldn’t work hard enough, or wasn’t disciplined enough, or I wish these A.D.D. behaviors weren’t so extreme in me…*

…but the truth is: it wasn’t my path. It wasn’t the route I was to take. See, it wasn’t one glaring choice or instance that I can point my finger to… It was a collection of small things. And I am grateful.

Oh, the miracles taking place in all of the small things in our lives… as the Psalmist says (Psalm 139 if I remember rightly) “I try to count them, they are more than the sand. I come to the end. I am with you.”

So when the waters flow, on a rainy morning like this, can I predict the path of every drop and where it will go? Or better: when I shake up a snow globe, can I anticipate where each and every flake will settle? No… but I know a general direction.

God has a general direction…that of healing and balance, that of Love. Friends, I believe that, and I want to share that with you.

Sometimes it takes the shape of the chaos of a shaken snow globe, sometimes a flood ravages the landscape, sometimes a pandemic of disease crosses over the earth, but those moments are not the opposite of love (to quote Mary Oliver), I believe they are part of a general direction in the work of God.

…In ways we can’t even pretend to understand and frankly, if anybody claimed to do so—to fully understand the will of God—I wouldn’t trust them.

See, to play with labels, I’m not a “predestination” guy. I suspect that God lets things play out more than our Western minds are ever content with, but…

…But oh, what worship and wonder and respect and awe I have for that great and holy mystery that settles shaken snow globes and keeps water in motion—that changes our lives, day by day. That prompts us to engage, and respond to all that is around us. What miracle is there in all of those things! What path toward balance, and healing, and love is God guiding us down this very moment?

How is God calling you to participate?

I’ve never been one, as a minister, to pat the congregation on the head and say “Jesus Loves You”—I’m not one to be content with what I honestly call in my personal reflection “a lapdog theology.”

I believe that in God, as people of Jesus, you are not just loved, but are valued. There’s a difference between those two words, isn’t there? Friends, everything this story tells me, this story we repeat year after year, leads me to believe that you and I are not just to be passive lapdogs, but rather we all have a purpose, a goal, and innate calling within us.

—somewhere in all of this, just now in your life—God is calling you—

—not just to sit on his lap and get a pat on the head, but to get out and do the things that are innate within you to do. The minister Frederick Beuchner once said that our true calling is “that in which our joy meets the world’s desire” (paraphrased…something close to that).

--Ok, this may be a silly metaphor, but sometimes silly metaphors lead us to God’s presence (how often we’ve learned that in our Bible Studies on Mondays)—so: I don’t think you are a lap dog… I don’t think God needs lap dogs… I believe God wants you to participate in (how’d we put it earlier: toward balance, healing, and love).

Play with me, friends: who are you? Are you a herding dog, bringing souls together, or a retriever, bring the lost souls in this world back to the pack. Or a hunter seeking those things that are broken in the world as they prey you engage and seek to change… or a guard dog, protecting the space, the customs, the tradition? Oh, we could go on… but try that on for size… who are you? What is innate in your behaviors that God wants to lift up in you, and invite you into participation?

Has the minister gone crazy? He’s comparing us all to breeds of dogs. If that doesn’t work for you, find another analogy—the point is that God is calling you to participate, and like it our not, you are already participating in the midst of all the small things, the small miracles, day by day.

See, we want to understand it all… every word of Jesus… every plan and every product. Every will and work of God!

But sometimes it is ok to say: “I don’t know”, and to live into that Holy Mystery.

“I don’t know” is a perfectly acceptable answer.

I met a fellow once who worked with children at that age when children are asking ten million questions about every little thing: “what’s this, what’s that, how does this work?” …and instead of answering them precisely with fact and knowledge and informaiton, he would simply say in an inquisitive voice: “I wonder”…

…and so, those children that he taught, learned to wonder. Learned to discover on their own. Learned that just as much could be gained from engagement and experience as ever can be gained from consulting a reference manual, or Googling a question, or asking Siri or Alexa, or relying on somebody else to tell them just how everything is. They learned to ask their own questions. Live into their own experiences.

So I invite you, this week of our Lenten journey: Come, as a child, with that wonder and that curiosity and that confidence that there is something to discover.

—Especially now, when life and routine become ever more familiar everyday, when the scenery around you becomes predictable—come to God with a child-like wonder, and a child-like curiosity.

Trust that in everything around you, God has imbued a path toward your discovery of this wild and wonderful life that you live.

For example (you’ve said it—I’ve said it!) *Well, we’re stuck in the house with all this pandemic stuff, and I am going stir-crazy!*

And then we posit our theories in an attempt to claim knowledge and control: *I think this is what will happen, it will all blow over*, or, *I think it’ll get worse*—(whatever it is you’re thinking based on what facts your collecting or maybe what you hope will happen—all those things that prompt our judgments in times like that).

Or we can say: “I don’t know”… but hmm… this is all new, this is all different. I never expected this! How will all of this play out? How will God settle the shaken snow globe, how will the waters flow? What small miracle is taking place this day? And how am I called to participate?

I wonder.

Peace be with you friends.

MUSIC!

What songs does this bring to your heart? I was thinking:

*“I wonder as I wander out under the sky…”*

OR:

*“Oh Holy God, when I in awesome wonder…”*

OR maybe:

*“Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou are the potter, I am the clay”*

CHECK IN

Let’s Check in: each week we’re receiving messages from our flock, our congregation, our friends. Send a note! Let us know how you’re doing? What you’re thinking? Share those little details that you’d share over fellowship. Let us know how you’re doing.

Here’s a few:

John and Doris Toman told me to share that they are doing fine! And they say hello to everyone!

Zack shares: *Just a note to tell the church that everything is going well on my end. I’m praying that everything is going well on your end!*

Doris Mattson shares: *My best wishes to all of you. Keep the faith and carry on!*

Sheldean shares: *Hello from the Ions.  Miss you all and hope you are well.  We started out on a car trip to Arizona and turned around at the Iowa border.  We belong here in our own home at this crazy time.  
Our thanks to Pastor Paul for the sermons and to Clarice for the newsletters.  Also to the two little angels (well, one is not so much an angel) who disinfected and cleaned the Church.  I’m sure it’s not too hard to guess it was the Lindes.  Everyone stay safe and healthy.*

*-Dick and Sue Linde say "Miss you! Stay safe, and get out for a walk! Oh, and Dick says "about one more week before he goes crazy!"*

*-Our sympathies to Cathy Dale and family. Her sister-in-law, Kathy, was hit by a vehicle and killed while walking with her husband Tom (Cathy Dale’s brother).*

-And in my Friday email I made a request. I wrote: *So, here's your homework: send me a note or leave me a message and let me know how you are embracing what God has given you, here in this time when so many others struggle to see beyond the limitations.*

*..And if you're struggling, well, give me a call about that as well! It'd be nice to chat.*

Karen’s Response:*I don't even know where to start embracing what God has given me. I'm thankful every day for the children God gave me and the grandchildren He has chosen for me. I'm so fortunate to have the freezer full of food and money to buy more if I need to or to help another person who needs my help. I could go on and on, but I'll save more for next time.*

Friends, send these notes, send these greetings, send these blessings. Let us share them as a community of love. We’ll share them in worship and in our communications. We are a people who share this love, and share who we are.

PRAYER *(verbatim)*

*O Holy God, for the grace and wonder of this very day, this very moment—be it gray outside or not, we give you thanks. For this breath of life and this beat of our hearts we give you thanks.*

*Holy God, we ask your blessing on all who receive this message and receive this prayer. Still their minds and open their hearts. Let them know of your presence within and all around them.*

*There is so much mystery, so much unknown, so much seeming chaos, but we know that we are in your hands, and that your love is at work.*

*Help us to see in our day to day lives all those small graces, those small miracles that you give us.*

*Help us to appreciate, and help us to participate.*

*We ask your blessing on all that are suffering in this time, in so many ways, mentally and physically.*

*We rejoice in the support we hear from this community. The bonding of otherwise strangers.*

*We rejoice that your will is being done. And we know that your last word always is a word of love, and hope.*

*So Holy God in this time together let us be those people of love and hope that you call us to be. Let us spread that love and hope throughout this world, to those we know, and to those we don’t.*

*And now Holy God bind us together (and I invite you at home to pray with us) as we share the prayer that your son taught us.*

*The Lords Prayer…*