

CHRIST THE LORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH, Pinole CA

March 29, 2020

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

God Hears Our Distress

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- [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)
- [Romans 8:6-11](#)
- [John 11:1-45](#)
- [Psalm 130](#)

Good day. This is the fifth Sunday of Lent and next week we will celebrate Palm Sunday. I guarantee we will have something special for Holy week and you will be receiving a letter next week with some more information and details. I hope everyone is staying home and practicing good hygiene, washing those hands, and wiping down everything that comes into your home.

So, I have been a hospice chaplain for about ten years now and the four previous years I worked in the hospital setting. Being a chaplain is about learning the wonders of the human being to survive in the most stressful situations. I learn everyday from the people I serve, whether they be a patient with a dire prognosis, a family member, a neighbor or co worker of that patient, or my own co workers out in the field and in the office, I see the hands of God at work.

I am often asked, how I can be with death everyday, and I must admit, in the beginning of my chaplaincy I began the first of several stages. First, I was fascinated at the dying process on a physical level, then I was fascinated by what I saw and felt energetically, spiritually throughout the

dying process, then I realized others that witness death experience similar things so I am not crazy, and my experience is real. But then the next step that emerged in my learning process was the meaning of the death, to those who knew the person, and those, often me, on the fringes of this now passed life. And lastly, I made friends with my faith, and what death means to someone who has faith. What death, and my mortality meant to me became more of living than of dying. This was coined in a country song with lyrics that say, "live like you are dying." Because we are, and we are supposed to, and it is not the end of everything.

A friend of mine had witnessed the death of his wife in a most tragic way. At that time both of us in our 40's, the idea of death was still far enough away that the news of someone my own age dying was a bit shocking. But this story was even more difficult to swallow.

My friend's wife got up around 3 in the morning to use the bathroom and never came back to bed. After a bit, my friend noticed his wife had not returned so he went to check and found her dead on the bathroom floor. He called 911 and began CPR and she was revived for a few moments and then died. Interestingly enough, when she was revived, my poor friend thinking she would be grateful, however found that she was extremely upset, and this is what makes this story tragic and amazing at the same time.

After she was revived, which only lasted a minute, she looked at her husband, my friend and said angrily, "why? Why would I want to stay here?" She died a moment after and stayed deceased. Needless to say, my friend carries a weird guilt of disturbing someone's stay in heaven, as he

knows her life on earth was fine with no major reasons to consider leaving, He also wondered about having a proof of some kind that there is a plan, another place, there is a something beyond. Lastly, the questions, is there meaning to life, what is death?

This being the last Lenten Sunday, as we look ahead at the passion and resurrection of Christ, we see the preview of that story put before us as preparation. We have the same players, the women, the disciples, even Thomas wants to be present, Thomas the one who missed the first sighting of the risen Christ. We have a tomb that requires the stone to be moved for entry or exit, we have mention of the cloth wrappings that bodies were wrapped in at death.

But more than the trappings of the story that represent the physical side, we actually see the beginning of the meaning of Jesus in relationship to the place of humankind through God's covenant. Let us look a little closer at the relational parts of the story.

Jesus has compassion, empathy and hears the cries of those he loves. Jesus has the stone rolled away, calls to Lazarus who is dead, and Lazarus comes out of the tomb.

Let us exchange some of the words here to more generally set the stage. God has compassion, empathy and hears the cries of those he loves. God has the stone rolled away, calls to humankind who is dead, and humankind is freed from the tomb.

Or:

God hears our distress and opens a path to humankind for connection to him and we become alive. God hears our distress and opens a path to

humankind for connection to him and we are alive. Jesus is our path. Are you alive? Are you living? Are you aware that everything is a gift? We begin a life here on earth with God as our strength, but we belong to God always, everlasting. Faith gives us security to give struggles perspective.

Is life after life with God so amazing that, even when called back to life like my friend's wife, there is a longing to go back to God? If God called our dead and dried bones back, would we want to come back? Most near death experiences leave people less worried about the petty things in life, and have given them a faith that life has meaning and purpose, but death is purposeful too.

The reason that Easter is celebrated is not that we as Christians have some insurance policy that we will have a heavenly life after death, but instead, it is to live knowing that deep in our heart that no matter what may come, we will be alright. Knowing there is a deeper meaning to our lives that goes beyond what we are presently experiencing. Just as birth is really but a gate to a life on earth that in heaven can only be imagined. Death really is but a gate to something beyond earth that on earth a heaven we can only imagine.

Why do we have doubting Thomas witnessing the raising of Lazarus? Because we are all Thomas. We all missed the actual first sighting of Jesus, and somewhere in our minds thought, if only I could see and touch him. But this story of Lazarus is proof and witness to Thomas, a primer, so to speak of what was to come.

We live in uncertain times, more so than any of us could have imagined a year ago. I have to go back to my memories and stories of those who lived before me. The survivors of WWI, WWII, the Holocaust, the Depression and have listened to stories of horror and of grace. Times that put into place certain war restrictions, medicare and social security, unions.

Uncertain times interestingly enough also strengthens faith. I remember my parents and their parents when churches were packed on Sundays and there were restrictions on Sabbath activities. The world was slower, and people felt safer in their faith during duress. Our faith today may feel different, but it is based on the concept that God has promised life to us as revealed in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Holy week in the time of COVID-19 will be a test of our faith that our lives are truly in God's hands, and in fact, they always have been. It will be a time to embrace our mortality in a way that frees us to live with faith that our lives have a purpose, a beginning and an end. That to live this way means, not to hoard, to be patient, to make purposeful decisions, to live without fear.

The God who can call Lazarus to life, calls you to life. God will once again hear our cries and take our human mistakes and show us grace. So far there is some grace, from some reports, there has been less petroleum and coal products consumed leaving cleaner air in some of the most air polluted cities. Communities and the government are being forced to re-evaluate their priorities. Our health care and human resources are being examined to see if a more equal distribution of resources is the right thing to do. We are wondering about changing our ideals from sword to plowshare on an

economic scale. People have had to cook at home and are finding better diets and taking time to do self care. People are reading. People are journaling their history. And some people are searching for meaning and faith. Families are struggling in close quarters, but they are also learning about each other.

We will take this time of reflection, slowing, isolation to renew our passions, renew our physical body, and renew our minds and spirits because things will not go back to normal. We really don't want to go back to normal. This will be our opportunity to change some of our brokenness, to resurrect from the tomb our most basic Christian values of equality and servant leadership. If our past tells us anything about surviving uncertain times, it is that faith is a key element. We will take this time to prepare the future of the church – because we will be needed.

In case you missed our opening collect, it is a perfect ending for today:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.