

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 11 – Trust Despite Disappointment

In the gospels, we hear much about those that believe in Jesus, or who see his works and follow him. We hear of those who believe he is the messiah, who have hope in what he will do and who are committed, all in. They eat and spend a great deal of time together, but the hopes and belief and discipleship aspects tend to get emphasized. But when it comes to Mary and Martha and Lazarus, it feels that the relationship is weighted differently. When he comes to town, he always stops in. The care and love and affection that grows over many a meal and late night conversation together is more detectable.

John identifies Mary as the one who poured perfume on Jesus' feet at a dinner in their house, pouring out her love and affection, wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. He wasn't just a teacher and a prophetic figure to them. He was their friend. So, when Lazarus fell ill, it was no wonder that they sent for Jesus, expecting he would hurry to see and help his friend. Their oral telegram said, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." And it says, "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus," he still delayed in coming.

The warmth of their relationship gives a point of contrast, a contributing factor to why they are so hurt and disappointed when Jesus does not come in time.

Even for the most even-keeled among us, we have hard days. We lose our perspective, lose our cool, lose our hope, lose our joy. We enter times of grief and loss. Moments of disappointment, estrangement from friends or loved ones. Moments of discouragement or loneliness.

I read a non-fiction essay this week written by a nurse, reflecting on the early days of the COVID pandemic, now three years ago. It took me back to those times of uncertainty and stress and the discord and unhappiness that quickly ensued, entwined with other stresses and unrest, political protests. At this point, COVID feels a little in the rear-view mirror and it all feels like a giant family fight that no one wants to talk about, like an uproar where everybody lost their cool, behaved badly, and said a bunch of stuff that they didn't fully mean, or at least really shouldn't have said out loud, but it has cooled down and we're moving on, and don't want to talk about it anymore.

As I read the Lazarus story this week, I was struck by how off-kilter everybody is. The anxiety, the unmet expectations, the grief, the hurt, the people frenzying about trying to help, the swirling sense of people cranky with each other, unveiled in their disappointment and dismay. Grief over losing Lazarus, missing their connection with him, missing a sense of closeness with Jesus, missing the sense of possibility and hope.

I imagine Mary and Martha kept one eye down the road, watching, hoping that they would hear a voice coming up the walk, and it would be him. But Jesus delayed in arriving. Not only did they watch Lazarus worsen, but they also sat with him as he passed, and went through all the heart-wrenching work of grief and burial. It was not until four days later, when Jesus finally came walking up.

Lazarus, their brother, is gone. Jesus, the one whose feet Mary had washed with her perfumed hair, has abandoned them in this dark hour. She and Martha are hurt. And when they hear Jesus is coming, Martha goes, but Mary stays in the house, hurt and dejected. And Martha bursts out with the words that Mary too will echo shortly: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Notice the change in how they refer to Lazarus. When they sent word to Jesus it was "Jesus, the one whom you love." Now Martha and Mary call Lazarus, "*my* brother." When Mary does come out, her consolers follow because they thought she was going to the tomb to weep. But instead, she weeps before Jesus, and her comforters weep as well. And Jesus becomes so moved by emotion and chaos that he too weeps.

Maybe Jesus expected this when he arrived, to find his friends in disarray and angry, with their eyes swollen from days of crying and mad at him. Or I wonder if he was surprised to see how quickly their relationship had changed, how fast the greeting turn cold and accusing.

In the poem this morning, Zolynas describes this point where one steps out of sight of the light, a half-step into the darkness where the light does not carry. This point where he says:

“if he were walking backwards
he would know the exact moment
when he lost the flame

he could step forward and find it again
back and forth

dark to light light to dark.

The metaphorical landscape of light connotes trust, closeness, connection, faith, joy, confidence, clarity perhaps. But the dark, on the other hand, is what? disconnection, hurt, doubt, disappointment, insecurity, uncertainty, loneliness, free-fall. How quickly, as Zolynas suggests, we can step from a place of seeing the light into only darkness.

“All I know is that place / where the light appears and disappears /that’s the place where we live.” I wonder if that is what struck Jesus as he was moved to tears, is how quickly his friends had moved from closeness and trust and hope and faith and confidence and love poured out in perfumed hair... to dismay and hurt and anger and Mary staying in the house while Martha lashed out, and everybody lamenting the loss, and the Jew whispering in their ears about how Jesus let them down, and the decay of their dear Lazarus.

As we have been focusing in lent on encountering Christ and our connections with Christ, I am thinking about that point, a half-step difference, where we lose the light. Where our rhythms and our confidence and connections are strained, and we get thrown off our center and we start worrying and questioning, short-tempered, irritable, mopy. We lose our perspective, and like Peter walking on the water, we start to sink in the waves, and we wonder if we will drown. A half-step.

What is it for you? What rocks the boat? What causes you to loses the light, to go from belief to disbelief and back again, from encouragement to discouragement and back again? What causes you to lose hope or perspective? Maybe it is being overwhelmed by injustice in the world, or needs that overpower. Perhaps it is the stock market, or the struggles of a friend, or a child, or a health condition, or changes that we are not ready for. We go off-kilter, losing our center.

In that moment when the grief and anger is intense, Jesus leads them to Lazarus’ tomb. John writes, “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’” “Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.” *Why the tomb, do you think?* Is Jesus trying to make this all better, to take away the pain, to rewind the clock, realizing he should have come quicker? Not that it could have worked that way anyway. Grief and shock and fear is not something that goes away easily, and Jesus’ friends walk wearily from days of it.

What is Jesus trying to accomplish at the tomb? I think Jesus goes with them all to the tomb, the way the guy in the poem knows which direction one steps into the

dark to see the light again. Because at the tomb, Jesus will direct them to move the stone, he will call Lazarus forth. They will see Jesus' power again, they will hold their brother and friend again, they will be reminded of who Jesus is again. Mary will recall why it was that she anointed his feet. Joy will overwhelm the sorrow.

But one does not erase the past. Jesus does not make it all better, he doesn't rewind. After all, Lazarus is still covered in grave clothes, everybody trying to claw the coverings away. Eyes are still swollen from days of crying. The questions of why they had to go through this probably will not wash away easily. Lazarus will die again. He is not immortal. They will grieve again, and wrap him in grave clothes again someday. *But*, in that moment, they stepped back into view of the light. They stepped from doubt and despair and dismay to belief again. The light that assures one of who Jesus is, of Jesus' love and power and compassion, was visible again. The light of connection, of faith in the face of fear, of confidence in the face uncertainty, of trust in the face of adversity, of feeling centered in the midst of all that might throw us off.

Jesus showed the power to bring life in bringing Lazarus back from the grave. But Mary and Martha and others knew that already, didn't they? Mary didn't bathe Jesus with her tears for nothing. They knew him, and they loved him, and they knew who he was. And they already knew Jesus did not heal every physical body. But in their intense moment of hoping and fearing and loss and disorientation, they lost sight of it all, and the moment grew dark.

And in that moment together before the tomb, they could see the light again. And in view of that light, they could again face the uncertainty, and the waiting, and the questions. In the light, they could remain connected to their Lord and their friend. In the light, they could believe again in the words of Martha, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

This is what is so concerning to the Jewish leaders and teachers opposed to Jesus. Jesus had so quickly reignited hope and deepened their belief and reminded them of his love and power. And that becomes harder for them to resist or undo.

In this season of Lent, as we near its close, celebrating Palm Sunday next Sunday, I pray that we might encounter and reconnect again, not just to the Messiah, not just to a religious figure, not just to a faith or heritage, but like Mary and Martha, to a friend, to one who loves us, to one who inspires belief and power and hope, even in times of uncertainty. Do you remember which direction to step, a half-step back into view of the light?

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But 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.” ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

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

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

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

Jesus Weeps

²⁸ When 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.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ The 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. ³² When 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.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ Jesus 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.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I 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.” ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The 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.”

The Plot to Kill Jesus

(Mt 26:1–5; Mk 14:1–2; Lk 22:1–2)

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”