

TRACKING SIGNS TO WHOLENESS

John 11: 1-6, 17-26

April 2, 2017, Lent V

Harriet Platts, Seattle First Baptist Church

1 There was certain man named Lazarus, who was sick. He and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were from the village of Bethany.

2 Mary was the one who had anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume and dried his feet with her hair, and it was her brother Lazarus who was sick.

3 The sisters sent this message to Jesus: "Rabbi, the one you love is sick."

4 When Jesus heard this, he said, "This sickness will not end in death; it is happening for God's glory, so that God's Only Begotten may be glorified because of it."

5 Jesus loved these three very much.

6 Yet even after hearing that Lazarus was sick, he remained where he was staying for two more days.

17 When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

18 Since Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem,

19 many people had come out to console Martha and Mary about their brother.

20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary stayed at home with the mourners.

21 When she got to Jesus, Martha said, "If you had been here, my brother would never have died!

22 Yet even now, I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask."

23 "Your brother will rise again!" Jesus assured her.

24 Martha replied, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

25 Jesus told her, "I am the Resurrection, and I am Life: those who believe in me will live, even if they die;

26 And those who are alive and believe in me will never die. "Do you believe this?"

The word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

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There's nothing like a miracle to flush out of hiding our doubts and suspicion. It's the tilt of the head, the furrow of the brow, the under-the-breath question, "*What?*," said in a 'this can't be true,' tone of voice.

Jesus, miracle worker from Galilee, was no doubt quite familiar with these kinds of responses from people around him, don't you think? On some level, I suspect it may have even fueled his efforts at times, not that he took any pleasure in evoking doubt, but rather the wonder that he persisted, acting with clarity of purpose, despite doubts presence.

Our gospel lesson begins by orienting us to place and time. Jesus, having returned over to the Jordan river where John had been baptizing people, was "out in the field" working.

The first 12 chapters of the book of John have been categorized by biblical scholars as the "Book of Signs," as they reveal a portrait of Jesus as miracle worker, healer, and One proclaiming unity with God. He's found over and over again, teaching, performing miracles of healing, standing clearly with the oppressed, and signaling both hope and trouble to come...all in the face of great doubt. To read straight through the book of signs, one gets a good picture of this One moving about decisively, one embodied as the Source of Life in his very being.

Now, I must confess the story and circumstances around Lazarus' death and eventual resurrection, the experience of his sisters, Martha and Mary and their incurred losses, Jesus' absence and then presence, has challenged me to keep the bigger picture in mind. The story has indeed

flushed out of hiding my own doubts, about what's believable, what's true, and has been wooing me to keep watch, to listen for signs of wholeness emerging.

As Steve read earlier, the gospel tells us that Martha and Mary, present at their brother, Lazarus' side, at some point sensed the urgency of what was unfolding before them. The signs were pointing to death, and they felt it important to send Jesus a message, to let him know his beloved friend was ill. The text says, "Jesus loved these three very much."

Sometimes when the signs of critical illness begin to present themselves, it's frightening and can be confusing, indeed may cause us to doubt our own judgment, capacity for making sense of what's happening. We may find ourselves looking, hoping for improvement for our loved one, hoping they're just going through another bad spell and that they'll come through this time as they have in the past, all the while, not seeing clearly what's right in front of us, because we don't want to see it.

In times like these, it's so helpful to have trusted others alongside us, to help read the signs, right?! Thank goodness we don't have to figure it out by ourselves.

There were times in serving as a hospice chaplain, I spent time with family members as they kept vigil with their dying loved ones. It was always a gift of grace to be there as a friend, supportive presence, guide, to help make sense of the signs. To be a witness to the hearing of stories shared, to offer prayers and sing songs, I consistently felt I had experienced communion, a time for thanksgiving for life, and a reconciling to the unfolding of healing into death.

My friend and colleague, Trudy James, whose mission it is to create opportunity for people to become more comfortable in talking about their own death, she and I have shared stories from experiences in being with people who are dying, and their loved ones. She's clear, and I have become more clear over time, that there are two things that people who are dying want. First, they want to know that our connection – relationship to them matters – and how it matters. This can often take the form of naming aloud the gifts of the relationship. Secondly, folks who are dying also want to know that we're going to be okay after they're gone. Dying parents and partners/spouses especially need this.

I have found this to be true, that when partners, parents, children – young and old, friends can give voice to the gifts of the relationship with the person who is dying, that we are giving the greatest gift of acknowledgment we can, not only for the person dying, but for ourselves as well.

Healing into wholeness can look differently from various vantage points.

- It may take the form of full restoration, recovery
- It may look-feel like small *changes of heart*, where once your heart was broken, betrayed, buttoned down for protection, that now there is new tenderness, strength, openness
- It may look like reconciliation where there's been estrangement.
- It may look like the courage summoned to finally face truth that's been avoided, knowing there's no turning back, that the time has come to step more fully into being who we really are, despite the doubt around us...or within us

- And yes, it may even look like a *miracle*, where there was no hope, where all was lost...and then, something new happens...something new is born.

My chaplain colleague, Stephen King, shares in an Interfaith of Wholeness liturgy, *"In the Hebrew scripture, the word for the peace from God, wholeness, and health come from the same family of words, shalem and shalom. Health in the Hebrew scriptures refers not only to the absence of disease but also to a sense of coming to terms with one's finitude and brokenness, a sense of honoring God and having a peace about one's life even in the face of physical brokenness.*

Can you imagine with me, Mary and Martha as faithful sisters, holding vigil with their brother? Comforting, tending, praying for shalom, listening.

We know from other gospel accounts, that Mary, Martha and Lazarus' home in Bethany had been a stopover place for Jesus and his disciples. It was likely a place of refuge, a place to let down. It was a place he *belonged*, and *they belonged to him*. These were some of his people. They *got* him. They supported him. They loved him.

This web of friendship-connection, well, it was like a base camp. Maybe you know about base camps?

You might have seen images of them from movies or documentaries about people setting out to climb a tall mountain, or take a voyage somewhere. Can you picture it? Prayer flags strung across lines. Clusters of tents pitched.

Base camps often are staging grounds for those making intentional, planned treks OUT into wilderness places, up to mountain tops,

exploring - walking through dangerous places, but there are always those who stay behind to tend the fires.

Rituals of cleansing, and confession are performed. Prayers are continuously offered, permission asked for safe passage through. And for, Jesus, this human/divine one, traveling his own trajectory through dangerous territories, this base camp of beloved ones, it was nothing short of a lifeline of connection.

But... while Jesus was 'away,' his friend, Lazarus, dies at base camp. Now, Lazarus was off *on his own* journey into another place.

The circumstances of Jesus' 'seeming absence' to this event, can lead one into tangles of doubt, overthinking, missing more important signs to be kept in view.

I've learned the painful lessons over time to trust in the experience of *presence* across space and time. I know what it's like to send out my own spirit across distance, to loved ones struggling in pain, facing death, and to trust this offering of showing up as true. This is not something I take lightly. I go OUT there with my heart.

You may know this too?!

Times when you've sent your earnest prayers, songs and spirit, your very heart out there across distance and time for a loved one in need. It's what we do to show up when we can't actually be there.

The song of lament sung by Sarah earlier, offers us a place to reflect.

*When through waters winds our path, around us pain, around us death:
Deep calls to deep, a saving breath, and found beside us faithfully there
is the love of God.*

Prayers for sure were unleashed for Lazarus and for his sisters. Songs were sung, petitions made, but all these could not reverse the reality of Martha and Mary's brother.

The story continues that some days later, Jesus arrives to the edge of the village of Bethany, and Martha and Mary, each, go out to speak with him. These verses provide us yet another viewpoint of wholeness, one where honest words are spoken between beloved friends, in a relationship of trust.

"If you had been here, my brother would have never died," they each spoke their anger and grief. These women lose their brother, and they have no idea where their friend Jesus was. Surely, doubt had risen in their hearts by his absence in the intervening days, wondering how it could be that Jesus had not altered the course of events for their brother. And yet, the text says, their faith persisted in this One they loved.

I wonder if Jesus really had imagined what he was walking into. While he KNEW of Lazarus', passing from afar, he had not been physically present at the vigil. I'm imagining the reality of what he found, the grief outpoured by his friends and those who had gathered with them to be surprising and disorienting to say the least. The text says, "He was troubled in Spirit, moved by the deepest emotions."

He had been *apart* from them, and they had gone through a painful experience. Despite his words of proclamation of being the *Resurrection, and the Life, and that no one will die that believes in him,* HE in a moment was faced with death straight up. Lazarus was dead. His beloved friend was gone. And he wept.

Jesus' humanity spilled over. Death was real. Loss was true in that moment in a way that signals for us something very important to see.

God is not immune to suffering, nor do I believe that God allows or causes death to occur JUST to demonstrate power over it. That would be cruel.

So what of this phenomenon of resurrection? What was God up to here?

I have faith that God is ALWAYS about working toward *bringing reconciliation between God's self and humanity, among individuals and communities, within each person, and between humanity and the rest of creation. THIS is what LOVE does.* God's love is a holy mystery. God does not promise we will be spared suffering but does promise to be with us THROUGH it. [Referencing the Methodist Book of Worship]

The felt stillness, the *pause* of the One we call our Savior can be troubling, confusing to say the least. When we call out to God, we still hope for a timely reply, yes?! But indeed God does pause. In this story, God allows Lazarus' death.

When Jesus learned, where they had laid his friend, he directed them to roll away the stone.

Jesus prayed: *"Abba, thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd, that they might believe that you sent me."*

Then Jesus in a loud voice calls,
"Lazarus, Come out!" And Lazarus comes out.
"Untie him and let him go free."

Well...there's nothing like a miracle to flush out of hiding our doubts, suspicions, but perhaps too our wonder...our lost faith.

Jesus, as a healer and miracle worker, the very Light of Life, operated from places of wisdom and knowing unfamiliar to most. He was ablaze in his consciousness, in his awareness of a much larger picture of things that transcends time and space.

I have no doubt the awareness of his own dying to come, fed his compassion and desire for those he was hopeful to awaken.

Jesus came, embodied as a wisdom teacher, God in the human form of love and mercy, to BE a radical vision of the resurrection way. The resurrection way is both a life and death enterprise. There's no way to get to resurrection without death.

14th century Christian mystic and theologian, Julian of Norwich, wrote, *"If there's anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again, we are always kept in the same precious love.*

At the beginning of Lent, Pastor Tim marked the path early that WE support one another in being raised up, that WE as friends and community CALL ONE ANOTHER OUT into greater fullness, freedom, to deepened capacity for mutual, covenantal engagement with one another and with the Divine.

For God so loved the world, God gave us each other. THIS is the resurrection way.

Amen.