

So what I would ask of you this morning, as I would continue to ask, is that you would extend your patience to us this morning. As Pastor Flora and I were talking yesterday, as we were dealing with the issues at hand in our community, I began to reflect and think about the sermon which I had prepared for this morning. And so in the process of reflecting on that, in praying about that, I believe that it was going to be best as a result to postpone the sermon which I had prepared for this morning to next week.

And I believe that what I wanted to do this morning was to share with you, just briefly, and that is this. In my prayer my desire was---Lord, I pray that in all of the difficulties and the tragedy which has shocked our community, how would you best guide me as I seek to encourage and proclaim Christ today to the church that is Columbia Presbyterian Church and to anyone who finds themselves here this morning. And so, after praying about that and then putting it together with a couple of things that took place yesterday in conversations, the Lord led me to a very different passage than the Ezekiel passage which I had planned.

So this morning there are no screens to tell you where the text is, so I would ask that you would open up your Bibles if you have them with you. If you don't, please feel free to use your phones or devices. And even if you don't have either one of those, I would encourage you to just listen to the Word being read. Because my hope and trust is that when the Word is read, that the Holy Spirit, God's Comforter, attends even the reading of the Word. And in so doing these were written to be heard.

And so I will direct your attention to John, the eleventh chapter. As we look at specifically: How does Jesus respond to tragedy? How does Jesus respond to death? Particularly this is the story of Lazarus. I will not be reading the whole account. I will pick it up in the middle of the story. Jesus has just explained to his disciples that he wants to go back to Bethany, but they recognize that that is going to be a difficult journey, one that might even lead to his being arrested, if not death. He then shares with them that Lazarus is dead, but that he would not remain that way.

And so we pick up the text in the middle of that story. I'll begin reading at verse 17. Hear now the word of God.

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world."

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Heavenly Father, by the power and the authority that you have given to your Son Jesus, and through the power of your Spirit that works together with this Word that has been kept for us, may you speak to us. May it serve as a witness to us that Jesus is the one in whom we can find hope, the one in whom we can find the power of God and the love of God. So will you meet us and meet this community in a way that only you can. And may you demonstrate your power, may you demonstrate your goodness, and pour out your grace. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Yesterday morning---I'm sure this was repeated across many here, as it was repeated across our community---I received a phone call, first. This phone call was from my mother and father who live in North Carolina. She had been watching the news. And she called, and she asked one question: "Where are you?" I didn't take the call at the time. I didn't. I was in a meeting. I didn't feel there was a necessary need. But then towards the end of that meeting, the phone started buzzing more. Texts were coming across. Are you at the mall? Where are you?

And that question was repeated often throughout the day. People were reporting where they were. But it is an important question to consider this morning. Because I believe, that while not using that specific question, it is a question that is behind one of Jesus's most important questions. "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?" That is God's way of saying to us, "Where are you?" And I believe that in this story of Jesus's response to the death of Lazarus, we find that the heart and the power and the love of God is revealed through how Christ responds.

And as I prepared for this morning, it is my prayer that God would use his Word to encourage you, to comfort you, and to equip you as you walk throughout the rest of this day and throughout this week, as you engage one another and as you engage those in our community. And may the Lord bring glory to his name.

Let's look together at this passage. Now I will tell you I haven't committed to memory everything I wanted to say this morning, so I would ask your patience as I read a couple of spots. But with that in mind, I want to tell you, as I prayed about this message and looked at it, there are three things that

stuck out to me in Jesus's response. It is that he reveals the heart of God, that he reveals the power of God, and that he reveals the love of God.

So let's look together, first, at how Jesus, in his response to the death of Lazarus and all the surrounding circumstances and those involved---how it demonstrates and shows to us the heart of God for human beings. Let's look together.

You'll see, as I have just read, that as Jesus engages Martha, he gives to her what is to be for her, a hope. At first she misinterprets it and looks for the answer farther into the future, and not in relationship to Lazarus. within her. But then as she calls out Mary, and Mary comes out to Jesus, we hear again Jesus's response. I want to read it again as we consider how it reveals the heart of God.

When Mary had reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

And it was such a weeping that those who were surrounding Mary said, "See how he loved him!"

This response of Jesus is important for us to look at, because in some ways it is a surprise. In another way, it doesn't directly answer the questions that are being asked of him. And you could take the questions are being asked of Jesus and in some ways boil them down to one word: Why? Martha and Mary are in ways asking Jesus, 'Why weren't you here? Why did this have to happen?'

And I will tell you that Mary and Martha's reasoning and their question of 'Why?' is not one that Jesus answers, nor does he judge it. And I want you to hear what I have to say. The question of why the events that took place in our community took place---that's going to be a question that's going to be repeated over and over again. But I want to say with all sincerity, I do not believe that is the first question that I would want to answer.

Because in many ways, as I find myself looking at these events and many events like them across our world, even across our own communities, I believe that the question of 'why' and any answers that might be given do not begin to unravel the complexities, nor does it unravel the enormity of death, nor does it unravel the complexities and enormity of violence. In many ways, I have found myself in conversations about 'why', finding myself at a dead-end street. Because I don't believe as human beings we were created to be able to wrap our minds around those complexities.

For I believe the chief question that I want to ask is not 'why', but "Who?" Who can meet us as a community? Who can really meet us and speak to us in our pain and in our questions? And I believe that is answered in the name of Jesus. Jesus is that 'Who.' Because watch how he responds. He responds in two ways, and in so doing, he reveals the heart of God for these human beings. And because this Word is written and eternal, it stands as a witness to us in our day and in our grieving and in our responses.

His two ways of responding in revealing the heart of God is this: First, Jesus grieves at death. And I recognize that seems to be a patently obvious statement to make from the text. But if we're honest, if we look at it in total, we should be shocked that Jesus actually grieves. Because think about it for just a moment. Jesus has already predicted that Lazarus would die and that Lazarus would be raised. So if Jesus knew what was going to happen, why, then, was he weeping?

And I believe that's a good question to ask, because in it, what we see is the heart of God, and it is this. Jesus weeps, because he is also broken, because the peace of God in the world has been

broken. God created the world, and for us to live in it, in what the Hebrews call *shalom*, an all-encompassing peace---relationally, emotionally, spiritually. He created Adam and Eve and human beings to live with him in a righteous, holy, intimate, loving relationship. But sin and its product of death has shattered that peace. And Jesus, as he sees Mary weeping, as he sees those around her weeping---Jesus weeps, because he longs for the peace of God to be restored. We need a Savior who weeps with us. He does not judge them in their questions, but he weeps with them in their pain.

But he does even something more interesting, which is lost on us, most of the time, because of our English translations. Jesus doesn't just grieve and weep, he also is angry at death. It's here for us in these phrases. Verse 33: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." Then again in verse 38: "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb." 'Deeply moved,' and 'deeply moved in spirit and troubled' is the English word that is trying to capture what was being communicated in Greek, and that is, Jesus was profoundly, righteously, holy, angry at the presence of death.

Though the death of Lazarus was not caused by violence, as in the case of what we saw in our community yesterday, but of our physical bodies which are broken and ill and given to sickness. All of it, whether sickness or violence, evil, and wickedness of all kinds is the result and the fruit of sin. And the consequences of it is death. And Jesus looks on it, and he is angry. I need a Savior who is angry at death. I need a Savior who weeps with you and me. Because I need to be reminded again that the *shalom* that God and his righteousness and holiness set up has been shattered, and I, too, need to weep. I, too, need to be angry.

And I want to say this pastorally and as sensitively as I possibly can, but something which convicted me to my heart, and I don't want this to be misinterpreted. But there's something I need to just get off my chest, because the Spirit, I think, is moving me to do that. Last night as my daughter went upstairs to get ready for bed, I had a few moments downstairs, and I was thinking about how---okay, I need to wind down for a few moments, and I turned on the television. And what greeted me was a Golden Globe winning actor walking into a restaurant with a weapon and inside of ten seconds, five people were killed. And I was so jarred by that. But I must confess to you, would I have been as jarred by that on Friday night as I was last night?

Have I begun to stop being angry at death? Have I become calloused to the reality of sin and the death that it causes? And have I so casually been brought into that this is just our culture. I need the Savior that shows up with Mary and Martha to remind me that if my Savior can weep at death and can be angry at sin and death, that means it's okay for me to grieve and to be angry at it, too. That means that Jesus, if he shows up---instead of judging them with their 'why's', but he weeps with them---that means that just maybe Jesus and this text is testifying to us the case that he can be trusted in our tragedy, too. He can be trusted because he is a Savior who meets us, who weeps with us, and who is angry at sin and the death that it causes.

Jesus is showing us the heart of God for human beings like you and me. Our community needs that. You need that. I need that. But he does more. In his actions in this text, he also reveals to us the power of God. As Jesus responds to the death of Lazarus, he reveals the power of God, because he demonstrates something that is so oftentimes precious to us: time and certainty.

Each and every one of us as human beings is bound by time and feel its pressure. We feel its preciousness, and we desire more of it. But the power of Jesus and the power of God is revealed as he responds to the issue of time, but we also as human beings, we want certainty, do we not? We want to know whether when we get into our cars that we will make it safe to work. We want to know that if we decide to go to the mall on a Saturday morning, we will be safe. But Jesus does not solve the problem of our being bound by time, and he doesn't necessarily give us the surety that life itself

will be devoid of tragedy. But he nonetheless reveals the power of God, because he addresses the issue of time and certainty. I want you to see that.

And here's what he does. Jesus is presented with the question of: If you had only been here sooner, then you would have been able to keep Lazarus from dying. We know as much from Jesus's own lips. He knew this was going to happen. He knew that Lazarus would be raised from the dead. Yet as we turn back, his disciples were concerned. This is verse 11. "After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.' His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' And then he's presented with Mary and Martha, and then the witnesses, just after they said, 'Do you see how he loved him?'---the same audience members said this, verse 37: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" They are presenting God with the time problem.

We, too, feel the time problem. James Cruz took an extra nap before he went into Chick-fil-A yesterday. Some of you took a left turn instead of a right turn. Some of you overslept. Some of your plans were thwarted...you weren't there yesterday morning. But yet we look at the suffering of our neighbors and the shock of our friends who were there and feel shell-shocked, and we wonder, well, if the timing had just been different...

But what Jesus is revealing---he actually comes and raises Lazarus from the dead, anyway, despite the questions and the pinch of time. What he's saying to us is, that what we feel about time does not thwart God's power. God's power is according to his time, and not ours. But God's message to us is, 'Why?' do you ask me? His answer is: Know this---I am not thwarted by it. Which means, that despite the fact that we can't escape being bound by time, that while we are in it, we can know that God's power is not thwarted by our experience of it. For ten thousand years is like a day and a day is like ten thousand years. That is God's....That is beyond my ability to comprehend, but Jesus is revealing to us: God's power transcends time. And his power can work.

Not only does he show us the time issue with God's power, he also reveals the assurance issue. He tells them....Martha...he says to Martha specifically, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus is opening up the storeroom of heavenly wisdom and is saying the following: In our days we will face the reality of vulnerability, insecurity, anxieties, and fear. We will suffer, as we are suffering. But the assurance that Jesus offers isn't an escape from it. It is an assurance that shields us in the midst of it.

Because, he is saying, because I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, regardless of what you face, regardless of what happens to you, know this---that you will, everyone in this room will live for eternity. The question is, will you enjoy an eternity knowing him, but never enjoying him? Or will you know him and enjoy him forever? That is the question.

And the power of God doesn't remove our insecurities of being vulnerable to disease and violence, but it does give us an assurance that regardless, there is an anchor for the soul, and that is Christ, who is the resurrection and the life. He reveals the power of God to us. There is great comfort in that, which is why the professing Christian can continue in this community, can love and can shop, can serve, can weep, can laugh, can celebrate, and can mourn. Why? Because our assurance through the power of God transcends both time and circumstances.

But finally, Jesus also shows us the love of God. Jesus shows us the love of God because of the way he responds. And for this I am so grateful that this is retained for us in the writings of the Scriptures.

In verse 38: "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said." And then this is the part I'm so grateful for that is still there for us---Martha's response. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

The reason why I am so grateful that that is there, is because it does reveal the love of God in this: Jesus comes in to our stench. He does not ask us to understand his love as an abstract principle or idea. This is the hands and feet of God made man coming in to the crushing, weeping, brokenness of a family, going to the tomb to stand there with them to smell death. That is the love of God we need--- who comes into the midst of the stench of our lives, the sin that so easily entangles, and the death that so often threatens us. Jesus is not turning away from the stench. Rather he comes as a Lord who rescues and resurrects.

Because you see, standing back for just a moment from this story of the raising of Lazarus, let's look at it together, broadly speaking. This man has died. And people have said, 'God, where are you? This can't be! Why weren't you here?' But Jesus comes in, announces who he is and the power of God, and he raises him from the dead. He weeps with those who weep, and he appeals and mediates for this family and for this man to God the Father who always hears him. What I want you to see happening in this story is a telescoping of what is getting ready to happen just a few chapters later.

You see the reality is, Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he would also die again. This story really is about a Savior who went to the ultimate stench of the cross. Who, while on the cross, his disciples would say, 'This cannot be.' The weeping of his mother for him. His own weeping in the garden of Gethsemane. His own crying out to God, who he had already called out to God on behalf of Lazarus and his family. Now he's crying out and saying, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Why? I don't know, except I can point to 'who'. This one, who would die for us, is demonstrating for us that God so loved the world, that he came in to it, not just to smell the stench of death, but to take it on himself. And in so doing, to be laid in a tomb, and to be raised on the third day, and who would say these words: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus reveals the love of God by sayings: I know it stinks. I hate sin. I hate death. Which is why I've come to rescue you from it. And the last word is life and victory.

The death of Lazarus is indeed for us a telescope to demonstrate that this reveals the heart of God, the power of God, the love of God, so that we may see that these things do not crumble in the face of our tragedies, in the face of our pain. Rather, it moves in with us. It takes up residence. And Jesus provides us with a hope, a comfort, and a love that can be experienced. And this: so that God, instead of crumbling at the face of these things, he sends his son to die and to rise again victorious over sin and death to save his people eternally.

So the question is, 'Where are you?' My mother asked that question. And it was at that moment that I was reminded of something very important that we need to see and remember. Going all the way back, the story which I have just told you about, and the sermon which I just preached, and the love and the power and the heart of God has been going on since the earliest pages of Scripture. That though God in his holiness and righteousness and glory created all things by the word of his power and created human beings in his image to live in *shalom*, in peace with him, that in the moment when Adam and Eve, our parents, decided to reject that *shalom* to seek their own, by their own power---in their nakedness they tried to hide from God. And do you know the first question God ever asks that's recorded for us in Scripture?

“Where are you?”

In the midst of the stench of sin and the death that it brings, God's first question is, ‘Where are you?’ And when he asks that question, he then tells us of a promise---that the seed of the woman will come and will crush the head of the serpent, i.e., Satan. And the end of the story will not be stench and it will not be death. It will not be a disembodied existence in the hereafter. No, it will be a resurrected, embodied victory over sin and death.

And the question that God continues to ask throughout the Scriptures of Adam and Eve, of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, of Israel, of the prophets, of the Gentiles and the Jews, and in this passage of Mary and Martha where he says, ‘Do you believe this?’---he is asking, and he is asking all of us, “Where are you?” Because he is a Savior who comes to us and to this community to give us a heart, a power, and a love that can bring the only real peace that cannot be shattered. Peace with God, rescue, and resurrection.

In the coming days, and perhaps it's already happened, there will be many conversations across our community. Satan, in his own particular way, will try to have victory and ask questions: ‘Where is this God?’ you say. ‘Where was he?’ you say. Well, we, who have heard the Word of God, who have been called to respond to it, who can be transformed by it, can be equipped to go into those conversations, and to answer that question by saying, ‘I don't know why, but let me tell you about Who.’

And we will have to weep. We will need to pray. We will need to love. We will need to listen. Because just as surely as Jesus stood back and told his friends to take off the grave clothes, many of you may be called to do the same with those that we are relationship with. To tell them of the new life and the hope and the power and the love of God in Christ. May God do that. And may he bring healing to us.

Let's pray. Our heavenly Father, may you bring the comfort of our weeping and victorious Savior to this community, to these hearts. And we ask you, oh Lord, that you would indeed, by your Spirit, give us a hope that transcends all these things, that gives us an assurance that will indeed give us life eternally. So Lord, please come and work. Begin with us. Make us new. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.