

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Lent 5  
March 29, 2020

**God Uses Everything: Trust Him**  
**John 11:**

Of course, hindsight is always 20/20. When you look back on certain difficult events, you can see, with the utmost clarity, how God used the circumstances to create something you couldn't have even imagined. But you don't forget the pain of those events either.

In 2007, some of the never-before-seen letters of Mother Teresa to her friend and mentor, Rev. Michael Van Der Peet, were published in a book titled, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*.

What was so astonishing about these letters was the depth of the spiritual darkness and doubt this servant of mercy suffered for decades.

“Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness are so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.”

Some in the secular press called her a “hypocrite” and “two-faced.” Even Mother Theresa confessed to her pastor that her smile was sometimes nothing more than a mask. So why would the church agree to publish such heart-wrenching confessions of this untiring servant?

Some are saying they did it because it will represent Mother Teresa's second ministry, to those who persevere, even during long periods of spiritual dryness.

Out of the suffering of one, many will be blessed and encouraged to carry on. That's because God uses everything, even Mother Teresa's long years of darkness.

“It shows that she wasn't a plaster-of-Paris saint who never had a doubt about God or the ultimate meaning of life,” said the Rev. Richard McBrien, a University of Notre Dame theology professor.

“This can only enhance her reputation as a saintly person with people who aren't easily impressed with pious stories. Those who think otherwise have a lot of learning to do about the complexities of life and about the nature of faith.”

Today's reading reports of a time of crisis for a New Testament family, and how each person responded to the Lord's apparently imperfect timing. What we do see in this passage is this: God uses everything, no matter how dire our circumstances might appear. **Trust him.**

The story tells of the (1) sickness, (2) death and (3) resurrection of Lazarus. Everybody involved in the story knew and understood the power of (1) and (2). Jesus was the only person who knew where all the true power resided, and so only he knew how this story was going to end.

One of the first things that this family did when confronted with a difficult circumstance (the serious illness of their brother, Lazarus) was to tell the Lord what was going on: “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

Since God uses everything, we need to talk about everything that's going in our lives with people we trust. In many of today's churches, there's a lot of pressure to put on the mask of "everything's fine" and not talk about the more discomfoting things that are happening to us behind the scenes. But it's in revealing these hard issues that we discover who really does care about us. "Lord, the one you love is sick."

If people really do care about us, then they're going to want to hear the good and the bad of what's going on in our lives. And if the people we love come upon hard times, then we should be all the more ready to listen and to be a vehicle of the grace of God for them.

When Jesus heard about Lazarus' sickness, he made two enigmatic statements: that Lazarus was going to be okay, and that God was going glorify himself, by glorifying his Son, in the events that were about to transpire. And then Jesus *does* an unusual thing. He waits another two days before actually making the trip to this family's home in Bethany.

How many times have you been frustrated with God's timing? We probably don't have enough fingers and toes to count the times we wish God would have acted sooner, or in a different manner. The response of Lazarus' sisters was no different. They were confused. They knew that Jesus loved Lazarus, and that he loved them, but still the Lord delayed his arrival. Two more days.

When he does finally arrive, both Martha and Mary, sisters who were very close to Jesus, talk to him separately.

Martha was known for her busyness and impetuoussness. Typical of Martha, as soon as she hears that Jesus has *at last* come, she runs out to him to let him know exactly how badly he had failed his friends. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Note that Jesus neither rebukes Martha for complaining nor defends himself. He simply soaks up her frustration. In so doing, he is like his heavenly Father. God knows the “big picture” but he understands that we don’t, and he’s willing to absorb our frustration.

Next Jesus engages Martha in an unexpected conversation about the resurrection. Martha’s expresses her belief in new life for the dead *on the last day*, but not necessarily her belief *in Jesus* as the power behind the resurrection of the dead.

So, he calls her on it. He says 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?”

To Martha’s credit, she does not hesitate to express her unwavering belief, not only in Jesus’ power, but in everything he claimed to be. And that is the simple nature of belief. Nothing complicated really. To believe in Jesus is to simply accept that what he says is true.

Jesus’ reaction to Mary was significantly different from his reaction to Martha. Mary was known for choosing the “better thing” and that was to focus on Jesus before anything or anyone else. He had engaged Martha in a theological discussion, but his reaction to Mary’s grief was to be deeply moved and troubled.

Why would Jesus be upset if he knew what he was about to do? You’d think he’d be trying to hold back a smirk, knowing he was about to do the totally unexpected.

But, instead, Jesus wept. Jesus has never been a mere passive observer of those who are suffering, especially to those who belong to him. When he rebuked Saul on the road to Damascus, he asked the religious terrorist, “Why are you persecuting *me*?”

Despite what he was about to do, Jesus felt Mary’s grief — felt *his own* grief — even though it was going to be dispelled with unspeakable joy within minutes. It doesn’t matter to Jesus if our grief lasts an hour or a lifetime; he feels it as deeply as we do, and even more.

And so, after his encounter with Mary, Jesus turns to Lazarus’ tomb and asks for the stone to be removed. Martha, the compulsive housekeeper, once again inserts herself into the situation and reminds the Lord that he will be committing a social indiscretion by opening the tomb. Because of the amount of time that had passed, it was sure to stink.

Jesus confronts Martha one last time. Clearly Martha did not yet understand. It wasn’t merely the resurrection she needed to believe in; she also needed to believe in the sovereign power behind the resurrection.

So, after praying out loud to his heavenly Father (so that everyone would know whom to credit with the unspeakable miracle they were about to witness), Jesus calls Lazarus out. And the once-dead young man walked out, still bound in his grave clothes. As a result, many believed.

What does this story cause you to believe? If God can raise the dead, is there anything less impactful he can’t do? Is there any problem, situation or circumstance that God cannot redeem (in a sense, resurrect from a seemingly hopeless situation)?

The answer to that question is ... **No.**

When you bring your complaints to God, he may engage your head (as he did with Martha), or he may engage your heart (as he did with Mary), or he may engage both.

However God does it, God has something gracious to show you in every life circumstance, whether joyful or difficult.

God uses everything: sickness, financial hardship, a wayward child, the loss of a job, even a **PANDEMIC and DEATH. Trust God!!**

**Let us Pray:**

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# **PRAYER FOR A PANDEMIC**

*by Cameron Wiggins Bellm*

**May we who are merely inconvenienced  
remember those whose lives are at stake.**

**May we who have no risk factors  
remember those most vulnerable.**

**May we who have the luxury of working from home  
remember those who must choose between  
preserving their health or making their rent.**

**May we who have the flexibility to care for our children  
when their schools close  
remember those that have no options.**

**May we who have to cancel our trips  
remember those who have no safe place to go.**

**May we who are losing our margin money  
in the tumult of the economic market  
remember those who have no margin at all.**

**May we who settle in for a quarantine at home  
remember those who have no home.**

**As fear grips our country,  
let us choose love during this time when we  
cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,  
let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace  
of God to our neighbor. *Amen.***