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AMDG

Lent 5A – April 2, 2017

What could this long and disturbing story be trying to say to us about our belovedness in God, about God's love and mercy?

When you think about the gory details of raising dead Lazarus, not to mention the spookiness of Ezekiel preaching to a valley of skeletons, doesn't it weird you out just a little bit? I mean Lazarus had been dead for four days, and was already starting to smell. And, did practical, dutiful Martha even want her moldering dead brother raised up? The whole scene seems like something out of *The Walking Dead*. Very creepy. All that dead stuff is disturbing enough, but the interactions between Jesus and his disciples, and his friends Martha and Mary bring up some very tough questions about God's role in our lives, not least of which is, why couldn't Jesus have gotten there sooner, so his friend Lazarus didn't have to die, and his friends didn't have to suffer? Was God or Jesus playing with the emotions of his followers and friends to make a point? Is that how God works in our lives, making us suffer, just so God can be glorified?

This story with all its messiness and awkward questions takes us to the very essence of the mystery of our faith. What part does God play in our lives? Yes, we experience God in the pretty sunrises and the loving relationships. We can feel God's presence in prayer and worship, in art, and music. But how do we experience God in the pain and death and difficult questions that are also part of life?

In today's Gospel the writers seemed to portray God as manipulating painful situations in life - such as the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus - to show God's glory, perhaps even to foreshadow the coming death and resurrection of Jesus. And, that gets us part the way into the mystery. In the tragedies of our own lives we may experience God's silence and God's absence as perhaps punishing, maybe even manipulative. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the psalms, show God's people experiencing God in this way - out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. Pleading with a silent God for relief from the painful realities of life. But, where is God? Does God not care?

But, Jesus' words and deeds showed us that we will find our questions answered not in our worldly expectations being met, nor in our worst fears coming to pass - but in the tension between the two. Our belovedness in God is in the midst of our worst fears and our greatest aspirations. Jesus takes all the messiness, the stench, the sorrow, the hopes, the fears, the disappointments - and he redeems it all. He showed us especially through his passion, death, and resurrection, that everything belongs. There is nothing that cannot be made good in God's world. That doesn't mean that everything is in it's perfect state - but it does mean that everything is in God's hands, part of God's great plan to redeem all things in Christ.

One of the worst deaths I've ever had to experience was the death of a student at the elementary school where I was principal. Trevor was six years old, in kindergarten. One cold morning in February, while his mother was sleeping off a night of drugs, Trevor and his older brother, thinking they had missed the bus, decided to walk to school. It was winter, and still dark. And, when they crossed Ft. Lowell Blvd. they didn't see the car until it was upon them. The older boy made it across. Trevor did not, and was killed instantly. The car drove away, and no one was ever caught. Though, authorities believe the people responsible are in prison serving sentences for an unrelated crime. This was a horrible tragedy. Should never have happened. And, for me, and it was made even worse by the fact that I was not at school when it happened. I was in Flagstaff at a conference when my secretary called me with the news. Throughout the day, I spoke by phone with staff members, central administrators, and parents, trying to be of some support from 300 miles away. The pleading of some of my staff still haunts me, Why aren't you here? When can you be here?

There was plenty to do when I returned the next day and for many weeks to come. The death of Trevor haunted us all for a very long time. And, as painful and horrific as the experience was, good things happened in the wake of this tragedy. Lights were installed at the place where Trevor was killed. Ben's Bells came to our school and did grief recovery activities with our staff, inspiring some of them to continue working with the organization. Trevor's brother and younger sister were taken from the mother that could not care for them and raised by their

grandmother and stepfather. The last I heard, both were doing well. And, I know for many months and even years after, we all held our children just a little closer. Several years later, when nine year old Christina Taylor Green was one of the victims in the shooting targeting Congresswoman Giffords, I could be with my good friend, Christina's principal, and walk with him as he went through a similar horror. Looking back now, I see that God's redemptive work inserted itself throughout the random, senseless death of a six year old boy, bringing love and beauty and peace in the aftermath.

God is not some puppeteer in the sky, playing out the tragedies of our lives for his amusement. However, this is God's world, with all its beauty and messiness; all its grandeur and darkness, all part of God's cosmic plan to bring all things to glory. And, it is the love of God, made manifest in Jesus Christ, working through the Spirit in us, that redeems the brokenness, messiness, and ugliness of the world. It is you and me, firm in the knowledge of who we are whose we are, that take the nightmare that life can often be and transforms it into the dream God has intended all along.

When we consider the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead, in fact any miracle, we must remember that the great miracle of all creation is that God uses the very things that should destroy us—the random tragedies of life and the detritus of our own sins, the ugly, the unjust, the sorrowful, in fact death itself—God uses it all to transform and enlighten the world. Death is not just physical dying, but going to the full depth of things, beyond where we are in control. And in that sense, we all go through many deaths in our lifetime, small opportunities to choose transformation instead of stagnation. Unfortunately, too many of us turn bitter and look for someone to blame. Or live in avoidance and denial of painful realities in our lives. So then death really is death, because it closes us off to growth and new life. But, when we choose to walk through life as it is, not as we would have it be, when we walk through the depths—even the depths of our own sin and mistakes, even the depths of our doubts and despair — we come out the other side, knowing we've been taken there by a Power greater than ourselves. Being saved by Jesus' cross and resurrection doesn't mean that we're any better than anyone else, or that we're somehow sheltered from life's

challenges. It means we've chosen to accept the paradoxes of life, to walk through the darkness, and allowed and accepted the great mystery of transformation. There is nothing or no one that cannot be used for our good and God's glory, if only we will open ourselves to the Spirit working in and through us. This is the great mystery of faith. It is how God is saving the world in Christ Jesus our Lord.