

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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V Lent, John 11:1-45

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning, Trinity Church!

In these difficult days, I hope you are taking care of yourself, taking care of your loved ones, and looking out for your neighbors. I miss being with you. I miss saying prayers together in our beautiful, holy worship home. And, even so, I give thanks to God for the opportunity to be together in this way, and, inspired by that gratitude, I encourage you, friends: do not dismiss this time in which we find ourselves as “only” the time between one season and the return to “normalcy” for which we wait. Realize that this time – right now – this time *counts*, counts as a full measure of life, and, in it, I pray we would continue to find meaning and grace and joy as Trinity Church, as members of the Body of Christ in the world.

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we recount the (long) story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Focusing on the story’s action, rather than the exposition John overlays in Jesus’ voice, the lesson begins with details expressing Jesus’ intimate relationship with Lazarus, who the Evangelist identifies as the brother of Martha and Mary, the Mary “who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair.”ⁱ These sisters send a message to Jesus: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”ⁱⁱ

John notes, “though Jesus [did love] Martha and her sister and Lazarus, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was” before he and the disciples began to make their way to Judea. Then, by the time Jesus arrives to Bethany, “he [find] that Lazarus [has] already been in the tomb four days.”ⁱⁱⁱ Now, because Bethany was near Jerusalem, many who knew Lazarus and his family had already come to call on them, signaling Jesus’ delinquency not only to the dying man’s bedside, but to the family’s grieving.

“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,” she leaves the crowds at their home, and goes to meet Jesus, “while Mary stayed at home. Martha [says] to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”^{iv} Then, while Jesus “had [still] not yet come to the village, but [remained] at the place where Martha had met him,” Martha calls for Mary, and *Mary* “get[s] up quickly and go[es] out” from her home.^v The grieving entourage follows Mary, and, when she finds Jesus on the road to Bethany, she [kneels] at his feet,” and reiterates her sister’s accusation: “‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”^{vi}

As Mary’s words hang in the air – heavy with hers and her sister’s understandable grief and frustration – Jesus sees “her weeping, and [all the friends] who came with her also weeping,” and

he finally fractures under the emotional load he carries.^{vii} The Evangelist remarks, Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved ... and [he] began to weep.”^{viii}

Among the perils of *our* current condition is our tendency – individually and collectively – toward hypervigilance ... *hypervigilance*. WebMD defines hypervigilance as the “preoccupation with possible unknown threats, constantly watching and scanning surroundings, [and] startling easily; a persistent sense of insecurity.” Putting it all too mildly, other resources add, “Hypervigilance is accompanied by a state of increased anxiety which can cause exhaustion.”

Hypervigilance prompts an internal police state monitoring every breath for anomaly, measuring every heartbeat for arrhythmia, and, in these days, interrogating every snuffle in our nose, scratch in our throat, and tickle in our chest for COVID-19. Further, hypervigilance assigns meaning and motive to feelings, circumstances, and events, encumbers all happiness with what Brené Brown describes as “foreboding joy,” the belief that every gladness is only a prelude to disaster, and, therefore,

I do not accept joy as a gift ...

I fear joy as a warning ...

I hedge my joy ... guarding myself against the other shoe that, inevitably, is about to drop.

In this way, hypervigilance confuses *correlation* and *causation*, and inspires dark, disaster indignations, like those Martha and Mary so unfairly aim at Jesus. That is, hypervigilance assigns cause-and-effect relationships to unrelated events that only happen to occur in proximity to one another in time or space. Back in Bethany, family and friends blame Lazarus’ death on Jesus’ absence, but let us be clear: that is not why the man died! Lazarus was sick, and neither Jesus nor the narrative gives any indication that Jesus could have healed him.

Though Jesus aches that he was not with his beloved friend in the last moments of Lazarus’ life, Lazarus died from an illness, not from neglect. And, in this reading, the story’s force shifts from the glorious power of Jesus to raise a man from the dead, to the power of Mary and Martha – no matter their loving hearts and intentions – their power to injure Jesus. The story’s real cause-and-effect, the clearest testimony of action and reaction, is the pain that the sisters’ treatment of Jesus causes even the very Son of God.

See, their *righteous* love and concern for their brother caved in on itself and became altogether something else, the tendrils of which point to the great lie of hypervigilance: that it is a *cure* for anxiety, rather than its *cause* ... Hear me again, *the great lie of hypervigilance is that it is a cure for anxiety, rather than its cause.*

Corporately and personally, we and our communities must find the *appropriate* measure of attention to maintain responsibility for one another’s well-being, while accepting that if we commit all our energy to *worrying* – which we license by brushing onto it a thin veneer of

“necessary” vigilance – then we will only become *more* anxious; *more* weary; and, fundamentally, *joyless*.

Washing our hands? *Helpful*.

Hiding under the covers and staying in bed all day? Not so helpful.

Asking for support when we need it? *Helpful*.

Assigning blame for circumstances beyond any individual’s control? Not so helpful.

Staying informed? *Helpful*.

Obsessing over news coverage every minute of every day? Not so helpful.

Living with the hope that this virus will pass? Helpful, of course, but dismissing this season as days to be endured, rather than lived? That is neither healthy nor helpful.

See, the truth is, our bodies *are* imperfect and vulnerable, and getting more so all the time. And the world *is* a dangerous place, where good people suffer undeservedly, and many are suffering with this virus even now, and, according to those who understand such progressions, still, many more will. And we will not be able to tally the lives we save by taking pressure off our roads and our municipal services, by avoiding contact with one another, and by staying at home. All of this is true ... but these are not the *only* truths! And to find an antidote to our tendencies toward hypervigilance, we must see beyond only these frightful truths and – with *faithful* vigilance and constancy – recognize that:

in the midst of terror and tumult, our God remains *Goodness*;

in the midst of fear and foreboding, our God remains *Love*;

in the midst of all chaos, our God remains *Peace*;

and, even in the story of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, in the midst of death, our God remains *Life*.

During these days of Lent we seek *these* abiding Truths – not shirking our higher responsibility to affect the change we can, every day that we can, but seeing *beyond* this darkness *to the light* and, by so doing, bearing light ourselves. Anxious obsession will prove an ineffective preparation for the Resurrection, and, to discover the empty tomb, we must practice the Easter for which we hope.

Therefore, let us continue praying God’s presence and healing mercy for those who are sick and those who are afraid; praying God’s courage and care for doctors and nurses, and for medical staff and scientists; and praying God’s wisdom and grace for our civic leaders and for us at Trinity Church – that we would find peace and strength in the knowledge of God’s Spirit with us, always.

Amen.

ⁱ John 11:1-2.

ⁱⁱ John 11:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11:17.

^{iv} John 11:20-21.

^v John 11:29-31.

^{vi} John 11:32.

^{vii} John 11:33a.

^{viii} John 11:33b, 35.