

“Lord, If You Had Been Here!’ and Other Prayers of Protest”

John 11:1-44

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5th Sunday in Lent

March 29, 2020

Martha and Mary were livid. There’s really no other way to say it. They were ticked off with Jesus - that’s the way I read this text. I’d be upset, too, after seeing Jesus’ choices. He finds out that Lazarus is deathly sick and he waits two more days before visiting! Even the narrator sounds apologetic - “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,” the text says, “after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” Some read Jesus’ decision to delay his visit as cool confidence. Our Savior is so totally in control that he can afford to let things go to pot for everyone else around him. Everything turns out exactly as he planned. But I read it as miscalculation, possibly born out of arrogance. Jesus said plainly at the beginning of this story, “this illness does not lead to death.” That’s why he took his sweet time. But the illness *did* lead to death. Jesus was wrong. And Mary and Martha were legitimately upset. It may be the only time that Mary and Martha agree on anything. There’s a story about them from Luke’s Gospel where these two sisters are contrasted with each other. Martha’s the busybody. The perfect host. Whereas Mary sits at Jesus’ feet to listen. Martha complains about it. She’s not helping me! And Jesus, who by the way, never seems to cook anything himself, tells Martha - the person who’s preparing his food - that Mary’s way of lounging around is the better way to go. At least that’s how I remember it.

But here Mary and Martha are absolutely unified. “Lord, if you had been here,” Martha says first, “my brother would not have died.” Ten verses later, Mary says the exact same thing: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The statement is loaded with meaning. At its core, it reflects a faith that believes that Jesus carries with him extraordinary power - death defying power that Mary and Martha trust and believe in. Your presence here would have made the difference, Jesus. But this statement also filled with that horrific recognition that Jesus doesn’t always bring his power to the places where others think it’s most needed. Lord if you had been *here*, but you weren’t here. You were somewhere else. You weren’t here which is why your healing didn’t come.

It’s easy to skip over this accusation since the outcome of the story is so miraculously wonderful. Lazarus lives! He walks out of this tomb, back from life. The power of Jesus is even more powerful than Mary and Martha had imagined. They

thought they understood who he was, but it turns out they underestimated the Lord of Life. The story has the happiest of all endings imaginable.

But I think it would be a mistake to skip over this plaintive prayer of protest for a number of reasons. If John wanted us to skip over it he wouldn't have repeated the protest prayer of Mary and Martha twice, placing that protest in the mouths of two sisters reputed to be so drastically different in all other ways. But more than that, this prayer is a prayer that Mary and Martha prayed *before* they knew how things would turn out which is the way all life is actually experienced. You don't pray this kind of prayer when you already know the outcome. You pray this prayer in the absence of knowing the outcome. I've never heard this kind of prayer delivered in polite company. It doesn't fit into scripted dinner time prayers, or even those normally offered in church. It's prayed by people who are desperate, who have lost so much that there's nothing much more to lose. It's prayed by people who are so angry with God for choosing to be somewhere else that they dare to let this prayer fly in the face of all of our theologies of fear warning us against challenging God, questioning God, accusing God.

John preserved the prayer. It's as if he believed that we might need prayers like this one at some point in our future. "Lord, if you had been here, my family member would not have gotten sick." Lord, if you had been here, my relationship might have had more of a chance. Lord, if you had been here I would not have lost my health. Lord, if you had been here I would not have lost my job. Lord, if you had been here, life would be different." John's Gospel preserves this prayer and it's not the only place in the Bible. It's a prayer found in various forms all through the psalms. It's a prayer prayed by Hannah desperate for a child. It's prayed by Moses angry at the chasm between God's promises and the lived experience of the Hebrew slaves. It's prayed by Tamar and David and Jeremiah, and Habbakuk and it will be prayed by Jesus himself, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a prayer prayed by people in desperate wilderness situations. It's a prayer that John's Gospel doesn't want us to forget.

For one thing this prayer makes all the difference for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. I know I risk all kinds of terrible theology by acknowledging that. Terrible theologies like, "If you just pray hard enough then God is going to heal the person you love." "If we just prayed hard enough coronavirus wouldn't be a problem." "Put your hands on your screens now. . ." Rubbish. I know I risk giving people false hope in pre-modern ideas, encouraging people to forsake solid science in favor of Middle Ages hocus pocus. I hope you don't hear me that way. I want you to hear this - we worship a God who listens and who is particularly attentive to people who are in pain.

And that does not mean that if you pray a prayer like this, you are going to get the miracle that you want. Which is the hard part about this prayer. It's actually the hard part about this God we worship. God is maddeningly inscrutable. Who knows why

Jesus waits two days when he knows his friend is dying! Who knows why he says “this illness does not lead to death” and then a few verses later, “Lazarus is dead!” Who knows why Jesus seems so calm and collected one moment or maybe it’s more like “out to lunch” and then is weeping the next at the tomb of the friend who he believes he can raise from the dead.

Faith in this God is not for people who think they are going to be able to explain everything in neat categories. God is at least as enigmatic as is the entire creation this God brought into being which can be humming along all well and good one minute and ravaged by a plague the next. God is at least as incomprehensible as is each of us - complex creatures that we are - shaped in the imagination of our God who refuses to be defined by logic alone. If God were always so understandable, always so predictable, always so consistent, we wouldn’t need Mary and Martha’s prayer to begin with.

The best thing we can say about this maddeningly mystical inscrutable God through Jesus - the best the we can say is that this God consistently works life out of death. I think God actually hates death if by death we mean complete and total endings. I don’t mean the kind of death that’s a natural part of our living. We all have to accept that. Our days are numbered. There’s a beauty in this truth. Even Lazarus’ days are numbered. He’s raised from the dead, yes, but he will die again at some point in the future. Life can’t be lived without endings of all kinds I don’t think God hates that kind of death.

I mean the kind of death dealing that leaves people completely broken and without hope. I mean the kind of death dealing on the planet that leaves people vulnerable to the whims of the powerful and resigned to accept life as drudgery. I mean the kind of death that says our city is a rat-infested, leader corrupted, drug filled blight that could never be turned around. I mean the kind of death that robs a person’s joy when he seems resigned to accepting the roles that have been prepared for him instead of embracing the call of his life. I mean the kind of death that steals the joy of living which is at the root of God’s generosity, offered again and again in creation including in each one of us. Jesus hates that kind of death. He weeps in the face of it. He grieves our losses with us. He wants a different future for us.

I think that’s why Mary and Martha can both protest Jesus’ absence and yield themselves to his way. Why they can rage over God’s seemingly callous absence and also say “thy will be done.” Maybe strong faith leads you to both places, sometimes at the same time.

That’s good news for what we’re going through. You don’t have to shelve your grief in order to rest in God’s care. You don’t have to restrain your protests in order to give your anxieties over to God. You don’t have to choose between articulating your pain and entrusting yourself to a power that is beyond you, a power that you need for

healing from the worst of what life can bring. Mary and Martha refuse to choose one or the other. And in refusing to choose, they offer us a better way.

I don't know what the next several weeks of wilderness have in store for us. I'm not even going to predict beyond a couple of weeks. Some among us are already grieving. Some among us have already lost work. Some among us are already angry over what seems like a suddenly dimmed future in school, work, life, their future. God makes room for their grief, their protest, their rage. I hope the church can make space, too. And I also see the possibility of new beginnings right under our noses. The possibility of a resurgence of neighborliness and dare I say a politics that grows from this ancient ethic that leads to life? The possibility of new hope for the planet perhaps? The possibility for a new spirituality in our homes in the center of our lives? Endings that need to be grieved and beginnings worthy of our attention and care. I see it all.

Jesus works this new beginning because, he says at the tomb of Lazarus, he wants everyone to believe that it was the Creator, the Holy Parent, who sent him. The established church, I'm afraid, has turned his language and the entire book of John into a kind of doctrinal litmus test. But what if Jesus was saying something slightly different. Believe that the one who weeps with us in our grief was sent by God. Believe that the one who can take all our protest was sent by God. Believe that the one who grieves endings with us was sent by God. That same one - this one who is willing to be wounded with us - the one with us in our endings, is the same one who grants us new beginnings.

God meets Mary and Martha in their wilderness. They weren't the first for whom this was true. And they weren't the last.