

WATCHING AND WAITING

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They are deep in the depths, Mary and Martha are. And Lazarus most of all. Pleading desperately with their friend, Jesus, to come and save them from despair. “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O LORD.” “Lazarus, whom you love, is ill.” Fix it, Jesus. That’s what you’re supposed to do. You’ve done it for everyone else. Do it for us. Now!

But Jesus does not get the memo. At least not the way they want him to. Instead he waits ... and waits ... and waits.

“Where *were* you?!” Martha demands when Jesus finally arrives, four days too late. We were watching for you, day and night, even more than those who watch for the morning! But you never came. Now the one you say you love is dead. His soul has departed his body. It is over. Hope is lost. But “if you had been here,” Martha cries out when Jesus finally comes, “if you had been here, with us, in our time of need, my brother would not have died.” And you can be sure that she is weeping.

Where have you been, God? is the cry of the Psalmist we have joined in the face of the novel coronavirus. Lamenting, with Martha, those places in our lives and in the life of the world that seem so far beyond our control. That seem so far beyond God’s control.

Out of the depths we have been crying to you, O God, for days! For weeks! For some of us ... years! We plead with you, God, says the psalmist. Are you listening? Do you care? And then ... silence. And more of the same.

What do we do when we cry out to God and nothing changes? When we come to the awful truth that the mess we have found ourselves in is too deep to crawl out of on our own? When the God we thought would rescue us seems so very far away?

If we’re anything like the psalmist, we start by looking inward. We repent. We turn toward the failings within our *own* hearts and minds. And we beg God’s forgiveness.

Because let’s be honest. Are we not, every one of us, also guilty of living beyond our means, of placing our trust in the Almighty Dollar instead of Almighty God, even as we rightly challenge our federal and state governments for their failings?

Are we not, every one of us, also guilty of building walls of distrust and hostility and self-protection, even as we condemn the humanitarian crisis along our border with Mexico?

We are. Let’s face it. We are. “If you kept track of transgressions, O God, who could stand?” we confess with the psalmist. None of us could. Not one.

But—and here’s the good news—with God there is forgiveness! In order to inspire reverence. So forgive us, God, we pray, confident that God will redeem our foolishness. Which is the point of the Season of Lent, is it not? We get ourselves into such serious messes, even to the point of crucifying our Savior. And we don’t know how to get ourselves out. So we watch . . . and we wait . . . for redemption to come. More than those who watch for the morning . . . even more than those who watch for the morning.

And—believe it or not—right *there* is the redemption! Right *there* is the hope! *In the watching and the waiting, itself!* Right there is the trust in a God who will not ever let us sink into the depths of our own despair. Because as long as we can still cry out, as long as the suffocating darkness of what we cannot ever comprehend has not completely silenced us, as long as we still have the capacity to be outraged at the injustice of the world that surrounds us, as long as we have the courage to admit our own failings in the midst of it all, as long as we are still willing to talk to God and as long as we are still willing to talk to one another, as long as we are waiting expectantly, confidently, defiant against despair, *we have everything we need!* And we have been redeemed.

“Even now,” Martha says to Jesus when he arrives too late, even now that Lazarus is dead and hope is lost and life as we know it has ended, “even now,” Martha says in the greatest act of faith anyone can possibly imagine, “*even now*, I know that God will give you whatever you ask,” she says to Jesus. *And God does!*

And Jesus, greatly disturbed, weeping for the man he loves, comes to the tomb, even though he is four days too late. And Jesus says, “Take away the stone.” And the stench of the death and the darkness and the despair does not sway Jesus from the task of redemption at hand. And Jesus, with tears of love for his friends streaming down his face, says to the crowd, “Unbind him, and set him free.”

And they do.

And the people who have lost all hope in these long days of watching and waiting . . . instead see a powerful resurrection rooted in God’s steadfast and persistent and NEVER ENDING LOVE—right before their eyes!—beyond anything they could possibly know with their minds. And God chooses to persevere with them . . . because *Martha* has chosen to persevere with God! Just like the psalmist says.

And now, 2000 years later . . . in the Season of Lent . . . on this fifth Sunday of praying to and with the God Who Suffers with us . . . in the midst of a global pandemic . . . I declare to you with every ounce of my being, with every fiber of hope that binds our bodies and minds and spirits together . . . with every prayer that has been prayed by those who have gone before us in faith, *that God is still with us*, even as we wait! That God has not abandoned us, even as we watch . . . even as we wait . . . for that Easter morning allelulia! That it does not matter to God how messy or smelly or scary that tomb we have created for ourselves has become—and it is messy and smelly and scary, to be sure! What matters to God is that God loves us, and that we love God, and that somehow somehow there is redemption from whatever despair has suffocated our hope. Even if we can’t see it yet. *Especially* if we can’t see it yet!

Faith is, in the end, the choice we make when it seems we have no other choice to make. Watching, waiting, trusting that God makes a way when we cannot see the way. Knowing deep within that the final answer is grace. Always . . . Amazing . . . Grace!

Amen.