

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 2, 2017

Journey Through Death to Life

John 11:1-45

We have come to the 5th Sunday in the Season of Lent,
this journey of 40 days and 40 nights that we take with Jesus,
through the wilderness, toward Jerusalem and the cross.

The notion of a journey fits the gospel of John.
21 times in this story alone, someone either comes or goes.
It's very much like our own journeys:
there is going and staying, starting and stopping, departing and arriving.
Life is like the walking of a labyrinth,
full of U-turns, switchbacks, backtracking, and disorientation,
sometimes in the middle of things, feeling close to God,
sometimes out at the edge of things, feeling far from God.

The challenge of our journeys is what the season of Lent is meant to reflect.
Now some people don't really like these purple seasons
of Advent and Lent.
One a season of expectant waiting
in anticipation of the Incarnation.
The other a season of testing and self-examination
in anticipation of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

That may be because much of Christian culture in America
doesn't teach us to appreciate waiting, or testing, or self-examination.

Much of American Christianity
offers up a lot of what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "full solar spirituality,"
which "focuses on staying in the light of God around the clock,
both absorbing and reflecting
the sunny side of faith."
This kind of Christianity strives always
"to be positive in attitude, firm in conviction, helpful in relationship,
and unwavering in faith."¹

This is all fine, to a point.
The trouble with this spirituality starts, says Taylor,
"when darkness falls on your life...
you lose your job, your marriage falls apart,
your child acts out in some attention-getting way,
you pray hard for something that does not happen,
you begin to doubt some of the things you have been taught
about what the Bible says."

“The first time you speak of these things in a full solar church,
you can usually get a hearing.
Continue to speak of them
and you may be reminded that God will not let you be tested
beyond your strength.
All that is required of you is to have faith.
If you still do not get the message, sooner or later it will be made explicit for you:
the darkness [must be] your own fault,
because you do not have enough faith.”

But the promise of John’s Gospel is not that there will be no darkness,
or that we will never have to walk in the dark.
People in John’s gospel spend a lot of time in the dark.
The good news is that the light who enlightens everyone
is coming into the darkness of the world,
and while the darkness cannot comprehend the light
and resists the light,
it will not finally overcome the light.

In this 11th chapter, the dark clouds begin to gather more heavily over Jesus’ journey.
His conflict with the leaders of the Jews has intensified.
Things feel ominous.
Then comes the news that Lazarus, whom Jesus loves, is gravely ill.
And the darkness deepens.

It would be easy for us, with our tendency toward full solar spirituality,
to misunderstand Jesus’ response when he hears the news of Lazarus’ illness.
*When Jesus heard it, he said,
‘This illness does not lead to death;
rather it is for God’s glory,
so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’*

But Jesus is not in denial here. He is not offering up a glib assurance.
Jesus knows where his journey is leading him.
He knows how it is that the Son of God will be glorified, eventually —
on a cross.
In fact, he soon delivers the hard news to his disciples.
He tells them plainly, *Lazarus is dead.*
It is a powerful thing when someone finally names the reality
that everyone is feeling but can’t bring themselves to admit.

At the forefront of everyone’s mind in John 11, is the certainty of death.
The disciples could have already caught the scent of death in the wind,
when they questioned Jesus,
*“Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you,
and are you going there again?”*

Now when Jesus insists on going,
Thomas replies,
 "Let us also go, that we may die with him."
And when Jesus arrives at Bethany,
Martha complains of her brother's death and Jesus' delay,
 "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

And Mary registers the same complaint,
weeping, along with the Jews who come with her.

Whatever is going on here, it is anything but full solar spirituality.
Death has visited this family and their friends
and the community of Bethany.
The Good Shepherd of John chapter 10,
now walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death.

So was Jesus wrong?
Was he in error to say, *This illness does not lead to death?*
Was he in denial of death?
Was his humanity showing through
in his difficulty with processing this hard news?

Or perhaps the message is that *this illness does not end in death.*

Whether Jesus, in his humanity, is gradually coming to awareness of what he will do,
or whether, in his divinity, he has known all along what is about to happen,
Jesus enters deeply into the grief and pain of the loss
experienced by Martha and Mary.
Jesus begins to weep.

Some say he is truly grieving the death of the one he loved.
Others suggest he regrets not coming sooner.
Still others suggest Jesus is weeping in bitterness — and even anger —
at the predicament of humanity, bound by death,
even as he prepares to confront that predicament.

And confront it he does.
Here in this moment,
Jesus reveals the theological heart of the Fourth Gospel.

In the face of the reality of death,
with Lazarus' stone cold body sealed in the tomb,
Jesus says to Martha and to Mary — and to us —
 *I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me
 even though they die, will live.*

The darkness of death, as real as it is, as painful as it is,
is not the end for those who journey with Jesus.
Jesus is on a journey that leads to death,
and then leads through death
to eternal life.

So Jesus performs the seventh of his seven signs in the Gospel of John.
He calls Lazarus out of the tomb.
Here with the stench of death in the air,
Jesus reveals his power to lead us through death.
Into life. Abundant life. Eternal life.

The moment was unexpected when it came.

I had signed up to work on the Habitat site in Sterling on a Thursday morning.
It turned out to be a beautiful morning — crisp, blue sky and bright sun shining.
One of the work leaders asked for to volunteers who weren't afraid of heights.
I've always liked the lofty perspective from ladders and roofs,
so I spoke up pretty quickly,
as did Maxie McCoy.

Our job was to remove the rooftop safety railings
that had been put up to keep the roofers from falling off.
My job was to sit on the roof and hold the railing
while Maxie stood on the ladder below and loosened the screws.
Then we lowered the brace to the ground.
There were about 30 of these braces,
so we spent about an hour and a half on the project.

From my perch on the roof,
I could look through the branches of a tree and see St. Francis hospital
rising up just a few blocks away.
The St. Francis edifice is a significant presence in the Sterling community.

We were about 10 minutes into the work when I felt it,
or felt *him*, rather — my dad.

You see, my dad spent the last few days of life on one of the upper floors of St. Francis hospital.
Sitting up there on that roof, I was looking across to the place on this earth
where my dad drew his last breath,
where he passed into the shadow of death,
and through it
to the abundant life that awaited him
in God's eternal realm.

I felt a strong connection with my dad,
a sense of his being with me on that rooftop.
But there was something else that gave me that sense
even more than being across from the hospital where he died.

When Dad was alive, one of the things that gave him the greatest fulfillment,
the greatest sense of being alive
was going with his church to do mission work.

Dad and I bonded in many ways over the years,
but one of the most impactful was the bond we developed on mission
in places like Ecuador and Costa Rica,
on a work site together, serving other people.

And on that roof, on that bright Thursday morning,
I felt him with me
and I felt a deep assurance
that this part of my dad's life
is preserved in the eternal life God has given him...
and given me.

You see,
Dad had already begun to live eternal life with God
while he was alive here,
doing the work his Lord while it was day
while he still could.

There came a time when he could no longer do that work in this bodily life.
After his stroke,
that experience of abundance faded into a memory.
But now, I believe,
Dad knows that abundance once again.
And I knew that abundant life,
sitting on a rooftop of a Habitat house in Sterling,
communing with my Dad
and with the Lord who gives us life.

Jesus said to Martha,
I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?

I believe it, and have believed it ever since I was a kid at camp, singing
"I am the resurrection, and the life..." *clap-clap-clap-clap*
But after that hour and a half on a Habitat roof,
I believe it even more.

The light shines when we are perched up in a high place with a blue sky overhead
and the morning sun on our face.

But it shines all the same
when we are stumbling around in the dark, searching to find our way,
fighting off our fears
and struggling with our doubts.

*Jesus said to her,
I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*

Do you believe this?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 2014) p. 7-8