

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Lent

April 6-7, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Preacher: Christine Nowak

Turning on the news often reveals the suffering in our world, and the beginning of this Sunday's Gospel reading presents us with yet another situation of darkness. Our hearts are moved by the pain of death, loss, and grief. But this Gospel passage also reminds us that our faith in Jesus calls us out of this darkness and empowers us to bring light to a suffering world.

Many of us are familiar with the account of Jesus restoring Lazarus to life, and we can clearly see how Lazarus is called out of the darkness of the tomb into the light of new life. However, Lazarus is a passive presence in this Gospel account; he is dead in a sealed tomb for most of the story, and after he walks out of the tomb the Gospel says nothing about his words or actions. So, if we are looking for a model of discipleship as we continue our Lenten journey, perhaps we should look to Martha.

This part of the liturgical year is full of women who serve as models of discipleship. Next week we will be reminded of the devotion of Jesus' female disciples as the Passion account tells us that they stood near his cross. And when we celebrate Easter, we will do so with Mary Magdalene who was the first witness of the Risen Christ. This week, it is Martha who is our model. She invites us to turn to Jesus and proclaim faith in the midst of darkness.

Martha is a woman who says what's on her mind. She tells it like it is. She is a woman who stands tall with her fists on her hips. In today's passage, she doesn't wait for Jesus to get to her house; she goes out to meet him. And, when she sees him, she doesn't stand silent in his presence; she bombards him with her grief and disappointment. Her brother is dead. For four days she has been grieving, welcoming those who came to mourn with her, and wondering why her friend Jesus wasn't there when her family needed him. She is exhausted and raw with emotion.

It is in this moment of darkness that Martha becomes the model disciple. First, in spite of her disappointment that Jesus wasn't there, Martha turns to Jesus, not away from him. In the face of great suffering, it is often easy to doubt God's loving presence in our lives and to turn away from God who we may not feel is with us. But Martha reminds us to instead turn to Jesus in our suffering. Even if all we can do is express our disappointment and ask our questions, when we turn to Jesus we open ourselves to the grace of new understanding and deeper relationship.

Second, we see Martha as a model disciple because in her days of mourning, with the concerns of normal everyday life stripped away, she is able to proclaim the faith that is even deeper inside her than her grief. As she and Jesus engage in a highly theological discussion on the road, Martha declares that he is the messiah, the Son of God. [By the way, when Peter makes this same declaration of faith in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives him the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Many of us are still wondering where Martha's keys are.]

Our observance of Lent can certainly exhaust us or leave us raw like Martha (just ask my husband about the year I gave up Diet Coke), but it also has the power to help us set aside the concerns of our daily life so that we too can connect with the faith that is deep inside us. We experience the wisdom and grace of the liturgical year when the darkness of Lent calls us to a stronger more mature faith, a faith that recognizes the light of Christ even in the midst of suffering.