

## Hopeful? Or Hopeless?

March 29, 2020

UMCG

John's Gospel, more than any of the other Gospels, is filled with personal encounters. Encounters that Jesus has with individuals. As you read through John's Gospel sequentially, you will be struck by story after story of individuals coming to Jesus, or Jesus meeting with individuals, to discuss and address life's deepest concerns. If you think about it, the first three sermons we've heard from John's Gospel this Lent have all been about personal encounters with Jesus.

Three weeks ago, we looked on as Nicodemus, the religious leader...the influential Bible scholar walked—or should I say “sneaked” into Jesus's life under the cover of darkness...in the middle of the night. Fearful of being seen, he came to Jesus by night. He was thirsty. Seeking. In a wilderness of his own. The wilderness of doubt, of questioning, of searching for truth—religious truth. Who among us has not struggled with doubt...with questions of faith?

Two weeks ago, we sat with Jesus by a well in the countryside of Samaria. And we watched as a Samaritan woman came at noonday bright, in the glare and heat of the sun. And Jesus asked her for some water, and struck up a conversation with her. Her wilderness was that of shame. She was alone, on the outs. First, as a Samaritan, a second class citizen compared to Jews. Second, as a woman in a patriarchal society. Third, as a woman with a questionable past: She'd had five husbands and was now with a man who was not her husband. Yes, the wilderness of shame. Thirsty for forgiveness and acceptance. Who among us has not been on the “outs” with someone or some group...shamed for who we are or what we've done?

Last week, Pastor Becky preached, and we walked with Jesus and his disciples through the dusty streets of Jerusalem. As we approached the Pool of Siloam, the disciples spot a blind beggar. And they see what they'd been taught to see...a man supposedly being punished by God. He'd been blind from birth. And that raised an “interesting” question for them. Did his birth defect mean he'd somehow sinned in the womb and this was his punishment? Or was his blindness due to his parent's sin? You see, the religious tradition in vogue made a direct connection between sickness and sin, transgression and punishment.

The wilderness for this blind man was bad theology, bad tradition, and its devastating effects on his life and family. Who among us has not experienced bad theology, or bad tradition, and its harmful effects on us and others?

In today's story, we travel with Jesus to the small town of Bethany, a stone's throw from Jerusalem, for yet another personal encounter. An encounter between Jesus and several of his closest friends—Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. Tragedy has befallen these siblings, these dear friends of Jesus. Unexpectedly, Lazarus has fallen ill. And Jesus is not with them. He's a distance away, across the Jordan River. Although Mary and Martha called for Jesus to come heal their brother, Jesus stayed away. And Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, ends up dying because...well, Jesus showed up late. Really late. I mean, four days late! And when Jesus finally arrives, both Mary and Martha confront Jesus with great emotion: "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died!"

Who among us has not responded the same way when tragedy has struck? When we have found, or find ourselves, in the wilderness of inexplicable suffering and death...the loss of loved ones, the loss of innocent lives...the loss of life we are experiencing right now in the midst of the Corona virus? The pain and loss of life often triggers those "woulda, coulda, shouda" times in our lives. "Lord, where were you? You coulda...you shoulda saved our brother's life!"

When you lose someone you love, the "woulda, coulda, shoulda" scenario can be devastating. I lost my Dad in 2004. Unexpectedly. Early in life. He was only 78 years old. I remember right where I was when I got the call. I was driving up to Lake Geneva for a day of fishing when my cell phone rang. It was my sister, Dianne. I immediately knew something was wrong. Dad had undergone surgery a couple of weeks earlier. Unfortunately he developed an infection at the site of the surgery. So his surgeon put him through a battery of increasingly powerful drugs without consulting Dad's cardiologist. The drugs did irreparable damage to Dad's already compromised heart...he already had congestive heart failure. By the time the cardiologist was contacted and was able to examine Dad, the damage was done. He had 5 – 7 days to live. He died before the week was up. We four Darr siblings went through that wrenching "woulda, coulda, shoulda" scenario many times before and after Dad's funeral.

Briefly, I'd like to highlight two aspects of today's Gospel story. First – what Jesus said and did. And second, what Jesus told his disciples to do. So what did Jesus say and do? Let's focus on Martha's dialogue with Jesus. \*Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor cuts to the chase saying: "In their short, powerful exchange about resurrection, Martha talks about it as something that happens in *the future*, and Jesus talks about it as something that happens *right now*...We have heard this so often that many of us are numb to it. The basic idea is that those who accept Jesus as Lord receive a coupon for eternal life. Later on, when needed, we can present it to the angel of death and gain entrance into heaven. In the meantime, all we have to do to secure our future reward is to believe in Jesus...But Jesus corrects Martha (saying) 'I am the resurrection and the life, those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and trusts in me will never die.'"

Rev. Taylor asks that we "note that Jesus does not say he has power to give resurrection and life. He says that he is those things, that in his presence, they become present reality, right now, because he is one with God, the Great I Am, whose life is indestructible...Those who trust Jesus begin eternal life right now, and nothing on earth can snuff it out." In short, those who trust in Jesus experience resurrection and life, abundant life, right now, not just in the future! Jesus then goes on to raise Lazarus from the dead. This story is extremely important because, as Rev. Taylor puts it, the raising of Lazarus is a "Dress Rehearsal" ...a Dress Rehearsal for Jesus's death and resurrection.

Second, what did Jesus tell his disciples to do in this story way back then? And what does he expect us to do today? He told his disciples two things: "Roll the stone away from his tomb." And then, "Unbind him and let him go!" Jesus, you see, brings about resurrection, and new life out of death and dead end situations. And our job today? It's the same as back then. Our job is first to roll stones away from tombs. We move what's blocking people from living full, abundant lives. And then we reach out and unbind people so that they can live full, abundant, meaning filled, purposeful lives. And you know what? It's in the unbinding of others that we ourselves are unbound and set free. Set free from the chains of self-centered living. Saved from ourselves and set free to love and serve others and in so doing love God.

As we continue to move through the Corona virus pandemic, we have many opportunities to reach out to others. To express love—our love and God’s. Check in on your neighbors through phone calls, emails, texts and social media. Hand written cards and notes are powerful expressions of love and care. Contact shut-ins, the elderly, the vulnerable...check in on them. Ask if they are OK. Offer to do something for them. (I was amazed this week to get a phone call from several parishioners offering to do grocery shopping for Donna and me!) And don’t forget to pray. Pray for those who have lost loved ones to the virus. Pray for those who are ill. Pray for all of our first responders, and medical staffs on the front lines who are laboring courageously to save lives. Pray for timely arrival of supplies to our hospitals—from face masks to protective gowns and gloves to ventilators. And be grateful. This week I made a point of thanking John Lee, Pastor Esther’s husband, who is a pharmacist. When I ventured out for groceries I made a point of thanking not only the check out clerk who served me...I also went down the line thanking every check out clerk and the store manager for working, for serving us at great risk to their lives.

So, let’s reach out. Unbind others and set them free. And we’ll be amazed that in so doing we will be setting ourselves free. Amen.

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Invitation to the Offering:

The Gospel read and preached deserves, yes, demands, a response. How shall we respond? By giving ourselves—our lives, our time, our talents and our treasure back to God. And so I encourage you to do that...now...and throughout the week ahead. I also want to share with you a first for me. For the first time in my life I gave my tithe, my weekly offering, this week to the Lord...electronically. It’s as simple as pie! If I can do it...anyone can do it. Just go to our website and hit the red button marked “Donate Now.” But, as always, remember...God wants you first and foremost!

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\*Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Dress Rehearsal,” in *Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain*, Abingdon Press, 1998, pp. 66-70.

