

Lent 5A
St. John 11:1-45
April 2nd, 2017
St. George's Church Bolton
Fr. Chris

Stand Fast!

When you face an overwhelming, seemingly hopeless situation, stand fast. Do not lose faith. The Lord is with you.

"Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

Many of us have received a phone call like this. It is the call you never want to get. We are summoned to return home because a loved one has taken ill. We get scared and suppose the worst.

I remember many years ago when I was a student in Seminary, back in 1976, I got that call from my mother. Her words were simple. Please come home, your father is in the hospital. She did not expand on the details. She left no doubt I should be on the next bus home. So I packed up my bag, grabbed a few books for homework, told a neighbor about it, to let the seminary know I was leaving, as it was about 8:00 pm at night. (He was a friend of mine from Connecticut, Bill Loutrel who used to be pastor of St. John's East Hartford) And then I was off to the Port Authority bus terminal.

The bus ride seemed to take longer than usual that night. I tried processing the phone call from my mother, and I started to think the worst. She didn't want to tell me bad news over the phone. Perhaps my father had died, and I was going home to hear this. Needless to say, I was so anxious. So I prayed very hard that he would be o.k. and that this would not be the news that I would receive.

As the bus pulled up at the Farmington transportation lot off of I-84, I saw my mother standing by her car, and I dreaded what I might hear, So I continued to pray for my father, and I asked God that he might not be dead.

On getting into the car, I asked my mother what had happened, and she told me that he had had a very bad heart attack earlier in the day and had almost died, but that a West Hartford policeman had come right away and administered CPR and saved his life. Then she drove me to the hospital see him for a brief visit. I stayed home for more than a week with my mother, visiting my Dad, and helping out around the house. He was in the hospital for more than a month after that. In those days, that's what they did: they waited until your heart healed up; and they gave you classes about the life changes you would need to make in diet, exercise and smoking if you wanted to survive for more than a few months to a year.

Survive he did. He made those changes. My Dad was my age when he had his massive heart attack, 63. He lived another 26 years until he was 89, when his heart finally gave out. His physical heart that is, not the heart that was the essence of his being that is with me to this day.

Come home. Your father is in the hospital. My fervent prayers were answered. I had dodged an emotional bullet. I was too young to lose my Dad. And I know I would have felt that he was cheated if he could not see me graduate from seminary and be ordained. He did that and much more. My prayers were answered. God knew I would still need him for a few more years in my life, and he saw me through some difficult times as well as shared in the things I could celebrate. God was with me in my darkest hour up to that point in my life. I was not alone. I felt that I was special, because I felt God's presence working in my life.

"Lord, he whom you love is ill." This is not just any ordinary person, not one of the hundreds, maybe thousands that had sought Jesus' healing touch before: this was one whom he loved, one who was as close as a brother, a very dear, best friend. He was ill enough that they sent for him to come, perhaps to offer a few parting words of kinship and concern while his loved one lay there dying on his deathbed. Maybe Jesus had the same concerns that I did, that they didn't want to tell him via messenger, but he would find out when he arrived that his friend was dead. But this was the living God, walking the earth. Of course he knew what happened, and what would happen as the Gospel indicated. This did not make it any easier on Jesus. This did not remove him from his emotions. This Jesus would go to Bethany and he would visit the grave of Lazarus his friend and raise him up from the dead, burial wrappings and all, stinking corpse that he had become.

Only God can do this. Only God can lift us up from the depth of the valley of the shadow of death and give us hope of new life. I could not raise my father from the dead. A West Hartford policeman, with God looking over his shoulder, saved my dad from that moment when it was not the right time for him to leave. God was looking out for him. But what about the countless other loved ones who have not been so lucky? What can I say to them?

What would I say? Stand fast. Do not lose faith. You have real hope, real promise. You are not alone in this.

The message of this story is that we are not alone in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. God is there with us. His rod and staff, they comfort us. He guides my feet in right pathways for His name's sake. He leads me beside still waters. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He refreshes and restores my soul. Through all this, no matter what, God is with us, whether we face our own mortality or that of a loved one.

Remember where we started this Lent on Ash Wednesday? There was a dark day if there ever was one: Remember that you are but dust and to dust you shall return! Not maybe you will return. Not possibly you will return, but to dust you shall return. You know not either the day or the hour, but of this you can be certain. Who can dwell on or with death for long, without driving themselves crazy?

But Lent does not stop here. It begins on Ash Wednesday, but where does it end? Is it on Good Friday with the death of Jesus on the cross? What do you think? Where does this Lent take us?

This Lent, this sadness of loss when we lose a loved one, this valley, in which we all must walk, in the depths of darkness and depression, has a light at the other end of the valley, and a loving God to help us walk through it. No matter what may come our way, we are called to relax, let ourselves go and fall in faith into the loving arms of God. He will not let us fall into our eternal perishing. Perish the thought! He will lift us up, like he lifted up Lazarus. And we will find ourselves raised, like him.

So this story is a message of hope to each one of us: That when we stand in the pit of life, when we are groveling in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we are not alone. We are not without hope. We are not without God's help. We do have life coursing through our veins, and that life-blood is always with us. And much more than that: The love of God is with us.

What really comforts me is that God has walked where we have walked, God has felt what I feel, what you feel, and this passage screams that out-loud to us:

"They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'"

JESUS WEPT! The shortest sentence in the bible and it may be one of the most important. God cares. God feels. God loves us enough to weep for us and with us. I am not alone. God is not some old detached being beyond the clouds. God is with me. Emanuel! Now I know why the angels sang this at Christmass: rejoice, for this is truly great good news!

Stand fast, and He will be there. He is there. You are not alone. God is with us. Emanuel!

This is no zombie. Lazarus is risen from the dead. This is not a cheap trick. The authorities fear what Jesus has done, as no man could do such a thing and raise someone from the dead. They fear His power, and they do not understand what it is about. It is this public act, which Jesus did in their faces, just outside of Jerusalem, that made them harden their resolve about what they needed to do to get rid of this threat to the status quo, and they began to plot his demise from this point forward, in little over a week after the raising of Lazarus, Good Friday would come to pass.

Lent does not end on Good Friday. It is not punctuated- with the death of God. Lent ends with Easter morning. God is risen. God lives. The risen God walks among us and lives among us. We are His, and He is ours. Emanuel. AMEN