

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Lent, as you know, is 40 days long. You know that because it's one of those biblical numbers, and because we have a couple of hymns that remind us that Lent is 40 days long. But if you count up the days from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday of Holy Week, you will count past 40 to 46. The reason for that, as you may know, is that Sundays aren't counted as being a part of Lent, and that's why we call them Sundays *in* Lent, and not Sundays *of* Lent. In practice, though, what we really have are five and a half weeks of Lent followed by Holy Week, and I think this is particularly noticeable in this first year of the three-year lectionary cycle when we read these long readings from the Gospel according to John. Next week is Palm Sunday, a day we have also celebrated as Passion Sunday in the past, and I expect we'll do that again at some point. But either way, on Palm Sunday we turn the corner, as it were, into Holy Week. The focus shifts. What we do in these first five and half weeks, though, prepares us for what is to come, and today is the culmination of that preparation.

Let's think back quickly to where we've been thematically with these readings. The first week was Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This was a reminder, right from the start, that Jesus is with us on this journey, that he has been subject to all the difficulties that we are subject to, and that he has the strength and the vision to carry him beyond temporary inconvenience and suffering. The next three weeks involved Jesus' encounters with three very different people, each in their own kind of difficulties, and each opened to new life by having met Jesus. The first was Nicodemus the pharisee, a "teacher of Israel" Jesus called him. His difficulty is that he is drawn to Jesus but afraid of what his friends and colleagues will think of him. So he comes at night so as not to be seen by them, and finds himself not teaching but being instructed, learning of rebirth by water and the Spirit, and illumination by the light of the world. In the second week we find a very different kind of person with a very different reputation among her people. To begin with, she is a Samaritan, looked down upon by the Judeans to the south and the Galileans to the north. But also among her own people she is an outcast as a result of her many marriages and her current living arrangement. In Jesus she meets someone who somehow knows about her whole life and yet does not reject her, who even offers her "living water" and a connection to God in spirit and truth. And she is overwhelmed by the encounter. And then last week we had the man born blind, who receives his sight by Jesus' ministrations and a special bath. That would be enough to change his whole life, but there's more. He gets caught up in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, and as a result of his repeated testimony about what happened to him, the man gradually comes to "see" Jesus for who he is, while the Pharisees demonstrate that they have lost their sight, at least insofar as it involves "seeing" the things of God.

Finally we come to today's reading, one more encounter between Jesus and still different people. This time it's his good friends: Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. They are insiders to the Jesus movement, as close to Jesus as you can get, and even they are not immune from difficulties. In fact, the difficulty they face is as bad as it gets: death. But what makes it even harder than usual to deal with is knowing that Jesus could have done something about Lazarus' fatal illness and he didn't. Both sisters bring this up. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." But if Jesus *had* been there, if he had rushed back from wherever he was and had stopped Lazarus from dying, I'm pretty confident that this would have been one of those many things that Jesus did in the presence of his disciples that did *not* get written down in John's

Gospel. (See Jn. 20:30) John wouldn't have bothered. But Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem now and to his own death. Time is running out, and he needs to impress upon his disciples the significance of what he is about to do, to grab their attention so that they will come to believe in him and trust him, so that they will look to him as the source of life that he is, for them and for the whole world.

And so Lazarus is allowed to die. But doesn't that just rub us a little bit the wrong way? Why does Jesus think it's okay to play with people's lives like this? Why does he put his good friends through this grief and heartache? And while we're asking this about Lazarus, why don't we just come clean and ask it about everybody? Why not chime in with the Judeans and ask not just why Jesus didn't stop Lazarus from dying, but why he doesn't stop *all of us* from dying? And if he can cure one blind man, why not all blind people? This is probably the chief objection offered against all religions, but particularly Christianity. If God has the power over suffering and death, why not just use it? And the fact that God *doesn't* end all suffering and death is seen as clear evidence that God doesn't exist.

Mary and Martha do not go there, though. Maybe they're not sophisticated enough. Or maybe they recognize that our human judgments about God, however logical and morally righteous, do not determine the possibilities for God's existence or actions. But neither do Mary and Martha remain silent. They express their grief and frustration to Jesus. And this grief and frustration surely reflect what was being experienced by John's community as he was writing his Gospel. Jesus had promised to return after his death, resurrection, and ascension, but he had not yet shown up. And people were dying. Even Jesus' own disciples, those closest to him. What's the delay? Why doesn't he come back, like he promised? And nearly two thousand years later we are in a similar situation. We are not giving up on Jesus, but we are surely bewildered by all the difficulties that life throws at us. We are dying, and Jesus isn't showing up. We are suffering in all kinds of ways. "Lord, if you had been here, those tornados wouldn't have killed all those people in Mississippi." "Lord, if you had been here, Dale and Eileen's house wouldn't have caught fire last week, or Jo Ellen's last fall." "Lord, if you had come a year ago, you could have stopped the war in Ukraine."

Jesus does not remain silent either. "I am the resurrection and the life," he tells Martha. What Martha and Mary wanted was for life to continue as before. They wanted it to be back the way it was. It's what we want too. We want those destroyed lives and houses in Mississippi and here in Champaign back like they were before. We want all the death and destruction in Ukraine not to have happened so that life there could be like it was. But what we fail to appreciate in our grief and frustration is that "the way it was before" was full of suffering and pain, destroyed lives and relationships. It's just that those things just hadn't touched *us* yet. We want to go back before they touched *us*. Jesus has bigger fish to fry, though. He is not content to leave us living as we are. That does *not* mean that he *wanted* the tornados, or the house fires, or the missiles and the bombs of modern warfare. It just means that he did not come to keep things as they are. He came to get to the root of our problem, to take on sin, death, and evil and to release us from their deadly grip. "I am the resurrection and the life," says Jesus as he goes to death and the grave for us and for our salvation. To each of us, buried with him in Holy Baptism, he calls, "come out from your tomb." And to each of us raised to new life in Baptism he sends us to "unbind and let go" all those who in the grip of sin, death, and evil by proclaiming the promise of his redeeming love and by my making that love concrete in service to one another. As we prepare to turn the corner into Holy Week in this last week of Lent, may we hold fast to this promise. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.