

MARCH 26, 2023 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Glad to see you all this morning and welcome to each one! The sun is shining through, assuring us of the gift of a new day and some of you may have seen the glorious and amazing sunsets these past evenings too – quite brilliant and beautiful testimonies of God’s creativity!

What do you have to share with one another this morning? Come down the side aisles and up here to the pulpit to use the microphone...

- I’ll begin with a bald-faced, biased promotion and invitation! A week from today at 3:00 on April 2 the Sunflower Performing Arts concert at Hesston Mennonite Church will be Pax Duo, a two-person multi-media percussion concert. One of the two performers is my son-in-law, Micah Detweiler, married to our oldest daughter, Hillary. When I first heard about this show I confess that I wondered what could be so great about two guys playing marimbas. But then I heard and saw it. It’s beautiful – the instruments make unusual, gorgeous tones. It’s entertaining – Micah and Tristan are practically dancing as they move up and down the plus-sized keyboards with their mallets. And it’s imaginative! They’ve added the element of a light show to the music that I haven’t even seen yet. So, I hope you can come and enjoy the concert.

CALL TO WORSHIP – three times I’ll invite you to inhale and exhale all together...

PRAYER OF INVOCATION –

Move among us with your life-giving breath, God. Surprise us with your love, your hope, your power and presence. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Lord, our lives are dry bones.

We are cruel in our words and indifferent in our actions.

We confess to the Lord . . .

(silent prayer)

Leader: Breathe on us, Lord.

Put your Spirit within us and make us alive.

All: We place our hope in you. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER

God of Jesus,

You are the breath of life and the ground of all that is. You move our souls to seek you as you seek us. We praise your name, and declare our faith in the power of your resurrection.

In times of hopelessness, when we ask, “can these bones live?”, you walk with us.

Forgive us when we fall asleep spiritually,
when we become stuck in our fear or resentment,
or mistreat one another as a result of our stuckness.

Give us insight, attentiveness, and courage, that we might encourage one another in the times
when we get stuck. Let us breathe in the breath of life that is your Spirit, whom we know
through Jesus. Our hope is in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life.

We freely bring our prayers and concerns to you. You are gracious to hear our prayer, and to
show compassion on all who call on your name.

We continue to remember all in our congregation who are navigating health concerns,
appointments and procedures, or making decisions about course of treatment.

We remember Norma and Dennis Duerksen as Norma recovers at home after being a patient at
NMC for high blood pressure. We pray for ongoing healing and for wisdom for them.

We pray for all who are residents at Bethesda and other area retirement communities as Covid
cases continue. We ask for relief from symptoms, recovery, and for perseverance and strength
for those who care for folks.

We pray for those entering their final days and for family members. Grant peace and comfort in
the multitude of emotions that arise at these times.

We remember Steve and LaNae Unruh as they grieve with the passing of Steve's father Jack.
We give thanks for Jack's long life and for the hope of eternal life. Bless this family with your
peace.

We continue to pray for people in need beyond our community and place.

We thank you for all who are doing hard work to prepare for the MCC relief sale next month.
Bless these efforts and work through them.

We remember the many cities and communities of Turkey still reeling from disaster, and still
grieving missing loved ones. May they know your love and turn toward you, and see your
compassion in human solidarity.

We pray as well for the people of Afghanistan who have seen tragedy after tragedy. We pray
for the women and girls there who are no longer allowed to attend school beyond age 12.

Give each of us the nudge we need to act as agents of your hope, peace, and love according to
our gifts and calling.

Let us not fall asleep spiritually, but let us become unbound as we believe in the way of Jesus
and live in Jesus.

Fill us with the Spirit of Jesus. In that name we pray, Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Loving God, you are the source of all that we have and all that we are. Thank you for opportunities to give, to share, to be generous as we return a tithe to you in reverence and gratitude. Bless these gifts and those who give them. May they glorify you and be used in the work of bringing your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

MESSAGE – UNEXPECTED LOVE AND LIFE – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

We've heard some stories so far this season from the gospel of John that are pretty detailed (long) and mysterious (kind of bizarre). Stories that are surprising – even shocking – as Jesus told the Truth about who he is and who God is.

We heard about Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus in the cover of darkness trying to understand who Jesus was. Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to be reborn of water and of The Spirit in order to be part of the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus was confused and didn't really get what Jesus was saying.

And then we heard about the outcast Samaritan woman and how Jesus met her at the well during the heat of the day. He told her all about her own life and about his living water – that anyone who drank it wouldn't be thirsty again, but would have a fresh, bubbling spring within, giving them eternal life. She got it – and ran to tell the whole town about it.

Last week we heard the story of the man who had been born blind. The common understanding of the time was that he (or somebody!) had sinned, causing his blindness. Jesus spit in the dirt and then rubbed that mud on the man's eyes. He told him to go wash it off and he did, and he could see. Not only that, but he was no longer considered a sinner or an outcast – he could take his place at the "community table", so to speak. And Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world!" If you believe in me AND... follow me you'll be able to see clearly. But if you try to make your own way and cling to your own power and control you'll be in the dark.

The story for today that Gretchen just read for us is, perhaps, the most dramatic and unbelievable of all. I'd like to re-tell the story – from the perspective of Martha. (put the scarf over my head)

You remember me, don't you? I was here not too long ago, telling you about another experience with Jesus and my sister Mary. This story was written by Luke. I was annoyed with Mary because she wasn't helping me in the kitchen. I asked Jesus to back me up and get Mary to help me! To my surprise and initial disappointment, he backed *her* up and told me that she had chosen wisely to sit at his feet and take in his teachings. At first I felt hurt and kind of scolded, but Jesus was our dear friend and I knew that his intentions for me – for all of us – were first and foremost love. He loved us and always wanted what was best for us.

In this story, written by John, my brother Lazarus had taken ill – really ill, life-threateningly ill. Mary and I were at our wits end; we were desperate for Lazarus to be ok, to be healed. Our love for him as our brother was compounded and complicated by the fact that he was also the

only male in our household – he was our social security. Without him, we would not only be left grieving, but also poor and without support or position in the community.

We knew we needed Jesus and his miracle-working power. So we sent word to him. He and Lazarus were very close friends – dear to one another. We knew Jesus wasn't more than a couple of days' journey away. And we knew that once he heard about our plight and Lazarus' illness he would come straightaway. So we sent word and eagerly anticipated Jesus' arrival and then we waited. And we watched as Lazarus got sicker and weaker... and then he drew his last breath and he was gone. We couldn't believe it.

We put perfume on his body, wrapped him in the grave-cloths and put in a tomb – a cave, as is our tradition. A big stone was rolled in front of the opening to close it up. And then the mourners came to weep and wail with us in our grief. This is how we Jewish people honor our dead.

Now, we also believe that a person's soul is present and hovers around and over the body for three days after the breath has gone. So even as we were deeply grieved at the loss of breath in Lazarus' lungs we were also, at the same time, still holding out hope that Jesus would come! Because, if it was within those three days Lazarus could still be saved. But he didn't come. (Sigh/grunt) What could possibly have been detaining him? What could be more important than the well-being of Lazarus and us, Jesus' dear friends? In the midst of my grief I could also feel deep disappointment and hurt and some irritation.

On the fourth day after Lazarus died, we received news that Jesus was on his way and on the outskirts of our town of Bethany. True to form, my sister Mary stayed in the house with the mourners, but I went out and walked toward Jesus to meet him. I confess, I was a little snippy with him at first. "Lord, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died. But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Hmph. I remember saying those words – and I truly meant every one of them. But behind those words was desperation and disappointment in the reality that Lazarus was dead for four days already – and Jesus could have prevented it! Also, it was embarrassing and shameful that Jesus hadn't even been there for the funeral. In our culture it was not ok for your very closest friends or family to NOT be at the funeral of a loved one. So there were lots of conflicting emotions, unmet expectations and the pressure of cultural mores swirling around in me. Grief, disappointment, confusion, irritation, shame, and more grief.

And then Jesus said those strange words to me. "Martha, your brother will rise again." I was caught off-guard, as I often was with Jesus. "I know," I said. "Lazarus will rise, along with everybody else – at the last day." This was also part of our Jewish teaching and understanding. It was a sticking point with the Sadducees – they didn't believe in the resurrection at the last day. But we did and I thought that's what Jesus was talking about. But *then* he said, "*I* am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never, ever die. Do you believe that, Martha?"

"I do." I said. "I've always believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God."

And by that time, I was so discombobulated that all I could do was turn around and go get Mary. The confession I had made was the absolute truth. I did believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. It's just that I didn't completely understand what that meant.

So Mary went out to meet Jesus. And the mourners followed her because they figured she going to the tomb. Mary's response, of course, a little different than mine, was to simply fall down at Jesus' feet. But her plea was the same as mine. "Lord, if only you would have been here; my brother would not have died."

Now it was Jesus' turn to feel the feels. When he saw Mary's tears and heard the weeping of the mourners, he wept with them. He felt the grief and the loss of his beloved Lazarus. And he also felt anger and angst. These Greek words, by the way, can have several different meanings and for whatever reasons the translators of these stories seem to "sentimentalize" or "tame" Jesus' emotions so that anger is translated compassion. Why was Jesus angry? Perhaps he was angry at death because it causes so much pain in this world. Maybe he was angry at the thought of his own impending pain and agony and death. Likely he was angry because his own people, his beloved friends, his disciples, the Jewish people all around him still did not get who he was and what he was trying to teach them about the nature of God.

Some of the people, when they saw him weeping said, "Awwww, isn't that tender? He's weeping along with Mary – he loved Lazarus so much." And that was true. Some of the people were cynical and disbelieving. They said things like, "Well, he healed a blind man... couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" And some of the people, particularly the ones in power who benefitted from the status quo, were threatened and fearful. They said, "This guy does miracles. If we let him go on like this, everybody's going to believe in him. Pretty soon the Roman army will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation. He's gotta go."

Well, Jesus was still angry when he got to the tomb. He told them to roll the stone out of the way. Before I could even think, I protested, "Lord, he's been dead in there for four days, the smell will be terrible!" My understanding about death was like Nicodemus' about birth. Once it's done there's no going back!

But then, the power of death met the power of love. Jesus showed us, again, how he lived in complete, perfect union with God. He looked up toward the heavens and as he always did, he offered a prayer of thanksgiving. Not of intercession or of petition, but of thanks. He thanked God for always hearing him. Jesus made it clear that this power, these miracles, were being done by God – through him, but not by himself alone. He was absolutely glorifying God, calling everyone's attention to God, making sure that all of those witnesses knew that this was being done by the same God who created all things, the one who blew the breath of life into the first humans and into the dry bones that the prophet Ezekiel saw. Jesus showed us that Yahweh is a God of miracles and mystery – a God that we can't explain or control but who loves us and longs for the world to be healed and complete in that love.

Our whole earthly lives are lived in the shadow of death. Death is an inescapable part of the cycle of life. But it's also a part of the mystery of God's power and creativity and presence. This

story is about how we live. It's about how we practice living in union with God – in prayer, in gratitude, with openness to God's surprises.

Jesus showed us, again, how we humans have been created in the image of God. We've been gifted with emotions and feelings, creativity and intelligence. And when we can live in union with God, plugged in to the source, we'll be able to reflect God's light and show God's love in ways that are miraculous and mysterious even to us. We won't ever do it perfectly, like Jesus did. But in those rare moments when we're filled with gratitude and we're focused on God, we can experience and share unexpected and surprising love and life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Resources consulted:

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VIII

The Believers Church Bible Commentary on John by Willard Swartley

The Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L Rohrbaugh

Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A

Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A

Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2

BENEDICTION

May you find hope in God's unfailing love.

With God is full redemption to bring us up from our graves and redeem us from all our sins.

May God bring to life all that is dry bones, and put the Spirit within us all that we might know God's love and peace.