

Meditation on John 11 amidst a pandemic

Michele Rizoli

John 11:1-43 (Psalm 130, Ezekiel 37)

Jason Chestnut tells the gospel <https://youtu.be/pLWnsre-sA4>

This is a complicated story, right? (*invite responses*)

I was reflecting about how we will hear scripture and how we will see the world very differently after this pandemic. Let me take you briefly through one way of hearing this today.

For me this narrative raises a lot of questions. The biggest one, of course, is the one that Martha and Mary ask, why did Jesus delay? How could he love Martha, Mary and Lazarus and not come quickly to their side? Someone died because he took too long to come and help!

That lies underneath the fears and anxieties we have at this time about when is the time to help and when is the time to stay away.

The next biggest is: Will there be a resurrection or a renewal of life at the end of this pandemic for all of us, as there was in the story of Lazarus? And what will that look like?

I'm speaking metaphorically, of course. We already can see that Nature is responding very favourably to this time of the death of the economy. Nature is having its resurrection. I think it is poetic that we are slowing down in Spring in our climate, exactly when nature is speeding up and bringing back life.

This week I have talked to many people, and I've noticed that we are not all acting in our best selves. I confess, I'm not acting in my best self! We are living through a global traumatic event, and each of us has a different trauma response, each is reacting to this in a very unique way: anxiety, stress, denial, competitiveness, anger, resignation. I want to say very clearly, that whatever you are feeling it's OK. This is not something we choose, it just is.

The thing is, we can't really control how we feel. It just is. We can only acknowledge our feelings, and then not let them be the whole story. We can't believe that our feelings are representing the entirety of reality to us.

It is also really important not to judge or shame anyone for how they are feeling, or for how those feelings are influencing their behavior, especially not ourselves. We must embrace ourselves with as much compassion as we need to embrace others. Even as we might want to invite people into a different space, do that without judgment or shaming.

As I reflected on this crucial incident in Jesus' life – the death and resurrection of his friend – I thought maybe we could use it as an entry point into thinking about how we are coping with all this and what perspectives our faith might give us.

I am going to use the characters in this story as models to name some of the emotions we might be experiencing.

Let's think about the **disciples**. In this interpretation of the story, they represent **fear and confusion**. In the previous chapter, some people tried to stone Jesus to death, and so everyone was lying low, trying to stay safe. Keeping a physical distance from that very real and present danger.

When they heard about Lazarus, at first they were confused about why Jesus wouldn't just go to try to heal him right away. But then they remembered physical distancing for their own safety. If we go there we might die, was what the disciples feared! – as it is for anyone in a helping profession right now, or anyone caring for someone with Covid 19.

It was a very real fear and potential danger. Your fears, our fears at this time are also real: fear of getting sick, of infecting others, of not meeting our financial obligations, of losing our work, of not educating our kids well enough, of losing patience, or losing control. Fear is a very valid response to the situation we are living right now.

But in the story, the disciples decide to face their fear and the risk. And they go to Bethany despite these to see what will happen next in the company of Jesus. I'm not suggesting we should take risks in terms of public health – though it may come to that, and already has for some professions (*pause to remember those we know are exposed*) – but that we might also consider letting God move us beyond our fears, from death into life, as the hymn goes. Fear is not a good place from which to make decisions.

Now let's consider Martha.

Martha, ever practical, avoids all the people that are at their house for the funeral, and goes out to confront Jesus face to face while he's on his own. At first she's **angry**: "If you had been here, he would not have died!"

In other words, "What took you so long? We could have avoided all of this!" **Exasperation**, is another familiar sentiment at this time, with people who are taking too long to catch on to the need for extra care in how we interact, for the people at the supermarket not keeping physical distance, etc.

Martha quickly catches herself and goes into "I must give the right religious answer" mode, she moves into **resignation**. She starts to try to console herself by looking at the bigger picture, hoping for something better in the future. Turning to faith is not

a bad strategy at all in times of crisis. In this case we do need to face that, yes, there comes a time when we all will die. It is inevitable.

For many of us on the senior side of the age scale, right now is a time of deep reflection on the reality of death at the end of our life journey and the possibility that it might come sooner than we thought. This is very difficult to process, but there is a gift in it as well. In the words of Dr. Ira Byock¹:

“To sit in the presence of one’s non-existence is to experience the present as real. Life is a precious gift, but a fleeting one. We live each moment, but just a heartbeat away from eternity. Everything else is thought or feeling, distinction, opinion, preference, style, choice. The perspective is stark and makes clear what matters.”

It is a hard thing to name, but I thought it was important to do: fear of death.

Let’s think about **Mary**. As we meet her in this story, she is deeply into **grieving** her dead brother, grieving what has been lost.

Some of the wisdom I came across this week is that we are all going through a traumatic event and that this produces grief on many levels: grief about a changed world, grief about the loss of normal, the loss of safety and of the freedom to come and go, grief about the loss of travel plans, grief about graduation plans and so on.

The thing about any kind of grief is that it has its own timeline, so please, please be kind and compassionate towards yourselves and towards others, whatever you are feeling. Be like the crowd who stuck around with Mary, supported her and took their time crying for several days. Mourning is a valid response to this trauma.

Or be like Mary, who knew she needed others to help her in her loss. She surrounded herself with friends, with people she could talk to. Even if in our case it needs to be with physical distancing. Please reach out and get help.

And what about Jesus, the main character in this account? Yes, Lazarus’ resurrection brings a powerful promise that God can transform even the worst of circumstances, even death. Yes, even if it feels delayed, it is not futile to trust in God who sees beyond what we can see. God is faithful and beyond us.

Yet, for this reflection today, I want to highlight something else that stuck with me out of this story.

¹ From This Pandemic is Personal – Dr. Ira Byock https://thriveglobal.com/stories/this-pandemic-is-personal/?utm_content=bufferf5775&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkedin.com&utm_campaign=buffer&fbclid=IwAR0pdWFNz4St2ntWIdfi_IU8CrUDHnDsWajp4XaGpHx_r_4i1QNdBuo5Fc

As I visit this narrative today, in the middle of the pandemic, feeling all the feels, the part that speaks most profoundly to me is that Jesus wept along with Mary. Jesus wept.

I need to tell you that I really don't believe in a God who sends suffering only to make a point.

The attitude of Jesus weeping, shows what I *do* know about God: God is compassionate with us in our suffering, in our fears, in our grief and even in our anger. God loves us and will never ever abandon us, no matter what happens, no matter what we feel.

As I said, I really don't believe in a God who sends suffering only to make a point. But I do believe that when we suffer we have an opportunity to draw nearer to God. Our feelings, whatever they are, are also an invitation to deeper reflection.

Accept that invitation, if you can. Above all, be compassionate towards yourself and those you are confined with. Tend to your own mental health as you are tending to your physical health.

And if you need help coping, if it's all too much, ask for help. We the church are here for you, God's hands and feet and weeping eyes, to pray, to help you find counseling, to support, to find financial resources, to find courage. We are here for each other.

I will end this time of reflection with a prayer from Psalm 130.4,5

So I wait for you God, my soul waits, and in your word I place my trust.
My soul longs for you, O God,
more than sentinels long before the dawn
more than sentinels long before the dawn
For with God is abundant love and the fullness of deliverance.