

# Sermon for Sunday, April 2, 2017 - "God Is Present"

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 2, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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## God is Present

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two more days.

His dear friends, Mary and Martha, asked him to come and help their brother Lazarus, but he didn't come. He didn't move. We're told, "even though Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus, when he heard Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." He stayed put. He remained where he was. What's up with that Jesus?

The explanation in the text and the back story are not terribly satisfying. Apparently, Jesus sees in Lazarus' death an opportunity for the in-breaking of God's glory and he doesn't want anyone to miss it. He doesn't want anyone to think Lazarus is just mostly dead. Jesus wants people to know that Lazarus is totally, completely dead so that God's glory can be shown more fully.

Except, Martha and Mary don't know any of this. What they know is that Jesus doesn't come right away. Jesus doesn't move quickly to help them when they ask. They know he could have done something and yet, he wasn't there.

This is how many of us experience God. God seems absent, silent, unmoved by our pleas for help, unresponsive to human suffering.

Martha and Mary both cry out to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." So, many people throughout the ages, and so many of us, have raised similar laments. "Where are you God?" "Come quickly, Lord!" "Do something!" "Why don't you act, O God?" These cries are found throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms. They are important, faithful things to say to God.

Yet, Martha and Mary don't get answers to their laments. He doesn't explain why he stayed put for two days. He doesn't say, "well, even though I love you I had to stay put so that God's glory could be revealed."

They don't get explanations; they don't get answers. Instead, they get Jesus. They get Jesus and, they discover, Jesus really is present with them, even though their request for help isn't answered the way they hoped. They get Jesus and his presence brings new life - not only within Lazarus, but also within Martha and Mary.

We don't get answers either. We also don't get our loved ones back from the tomb as Martha and Mary did. But, we do get Jesus. He is present with us. And, his presence gives us new life in much the same way

he gave new life to Martha, Mary and Lazarus.

Jesus shows Martha and Mary that he is truly present with them in how he responds to their laments and grief. He doesn't critique or correct them. He doesn't turn aside or avoid their pain. Instead, he stays engaged and he is deeply moved by their pain.

When Martha says, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died," Jesus engages her in conversation. He assures her of God's presence by telling her, "I AM, the resurrection and the life." He uses the ancient name of God for himself and tells Martha that God, God the great I AM, is right there with her. He promises her that God is present and bringing new life now and forever, even when she can't see it. These promises create faith in Martha; they create something new within her. They bring new life and hope where there was only grief and pain.

Those same promises and the presence of Jesus do the same for us each Sunday. They create faith within us; they breathe new life into us.

When Mary comes to Jesus with her lament and her tears, Jesus remains present to her and is deeply moved by her. We're told that when Jesus sees Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He doesn't turn away. He doesn't tell her everything will be OK. He begins to weep. Mary finds that she is not alone; Jesus is with her in her pain, sharing her tears. She is given comfort and hope - new life by Jesus' presence.

Jesus is present with us sharing our tears and our sorrow as well. God does not turn away even in the face of deep anguish. God joins us.

Then, after being so present to Martha and Mary, Jesus shows that he can be present even to Lazarus, even though Lazarus is really, truly dead. Jesus can reach Lazarus - even in the tomb.

Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the presence of God.

Lazarus was brought back to life on earth for a time. He died an earthly death again. Yet, now he knew deep in his bones that God was always present for him and that God's presence means life, now and forever.

God is always present for us even when we cannot see it, even when we have no answers. God stays with us. God remains true to us even when it seems God is delaying, even when we feel only absence. God stays present to us when we are angry, when we lament, when we think God is not acting, when sorrow is overpowering, when our loved ones die, when we die.

Nothing can separate us from the presence of God. This presence gives us new life, now and forever. This presence unbinds us and helps us to unbind others.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.