

Thy Will Be Done...In Patience!

Shepherd's Grace Church

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Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of [Bethany](#), the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with [perfume](#) and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you [love](#) is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This [illness](#) does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of [daylight](#)? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen [asleep](#), but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been [speaking](#) about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his [fellow](#) disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near [Jerusalem](#), some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at [home](#). ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know [that God](#) will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will [live](#), ²⁶and everyone who lives and [believes](#) in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the [Messiah](#), the [Son](#) of God, the one coming into the [world](#)." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her [sister Mary](#), and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the [village](#), but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out.

They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² 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."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in [spirit](#) and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. (John 11: 1-45) (Also Read Ezek. 37: 1-14)

One of these days it will be spring! The calendar tells us that but this season of winter just does not want to give up. It wants to hold on to us and claim us as it beats us down and buries us in submission to colder than average temperatures and unusual winter like effects. I heard there was snow that covered the ground in a small community not far from here this week! I also heard there was a hail storm at Mulvane that caused severe damage to many cars. There has been frost on my windshield every morning this week and most of us still have our furnace on...even, as I am reminded, if it is only for a while during the day to "take the chill off" the air in our house! But, one of these days it will be spring!

I know this because on Thursday this week I went to the first track meet of the season. The meet was in Oxford and as I got out of my car, wearing only a light jacket over a t-shirt, I saw kids running in shorts and laughing! I saw sweats being shed and events being run. Track is a sure sign of spring, right? That is until the clouds roll in and the north wind starts to blow and the temperature drops to 35 degrees from 60 in just a matter of minutes. That is until those same kids who were wearing shorts a few minutes earlier are now huddled up in blankets and reaching for the extra sweatshirt they are now grateful their mom made them throw in the bag! That is until it becomes so cold that the kids running the 400 meter

relay do not even take off their warm-ups until they see the baton passed to the runner just before them...that is to say until it is about 15 seconds before time for them to run!

Spring is coming and I know it is coming but sometimes I am just so impatient for it to get here! I want to see the blooms of the Bradford pears and the beautiful color of the tulips and iris as they push through the ground. I want to see death give way to new life and I want to experience the warmth of that life as an affirmation that once again, God is calling us to something more! I want spring!...and I want spring now! I am out of patience with winter! I am out of patience with death!

And then I read Ezekiel, the passage that was shared this morning. In this passage, the Lord leads us out to the dry and dastardly valley of death. The Lord leads us to the long winter of discontent and invites us to recognize just how fragile we are! I look around the valley before the Lord begins to speak and I recognize that in the valley, just as in winter we are trapped. We cannot change the weather! We cannot bring spring a single day earlier. We are trapped in a weather cycle over which we have no control.

In the same way we are trapped in the valley of death. As we listen to Ezekiel this morning we realize we are the dry bones. We are the lifeless leftovers from the killing cold of winter and there is nothing we can do! We are disconnected from ourselves and from each other. We have no muscle, no tissue, no blood coursing through our veins. Life is beyond our control and there is nothing we can do about it. By ourselves, we are in death! Separated from each other we cannot survive! Separated from God we cannot even breathe! How can we become connected again? How can we who are in death even have the hope of life?

This is exactly where the gospel lesson for today meets us! Once again we are confronted by a long story John tells in order to communicate clearly that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. (John 20) We have seen several of these stories on our journey through Lent; Nicodemus and Jesus at night, the woman at the well, the healing of the blind man all have helped us understand more completely the mission of Jesus. That mission is spelled out completely and somewhat Ironically in a short passage. John speaks in these long narrative stories to say plainly, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."(John 6: 38) Jesus came to do God's will! To lose nothing! To submit completely to the Father! Thy will be done! In Matthew's gospel that is His prayer. It is just as clear to John!

God's will however is not easily reduced to our complete and total submission. We are in winter! We are in death and just because we long for spring we cannot bring it...not even a day sooner! Jesus needs us to know this and for this reason, John shares the long story today about Lazarus.

Lazarus has taken ill. He is at his home near Jerusalem. His sisters do what good family members do. They pray. They send a message to Jesus letting Him know that Lazarus is ill and in need of His healing power! In faith they send their message. Mary and Martha believe Jesus has the power to heal and they trust in that power.

Most of us are willing to trust in the power of God to heal an illness. We offer our prayers every Sunday as we gather for joys and concerns. We have a prayer chain through our church and through our community. We pray boldly and with confidence, knowing that God has the power to answer our prayer and even though we trust God's power most of us pray "my will be done" not Thy Will. Our prayers are for what we want. Even the healings we want for others are things we want and when God's answer is in something other than our want, we wonder why God did not hear our prayer.

We say things like, "God has three answers to our prayer; yes, no, and not now," but we wonder in our hearts why God did not give us what we asked in prayer. Today, we are confronted with this circumstance as we listen to Jesus' response to Mary and Martha's prayer. He hears their request but then sets it aside. He says, "this illness does not result in death but in God's glory and so the Son of God may be glorified in it!" So do we hear in this response that Mary and Martha's request is set aside all for God's glory? Does the Son of God ignore a request for something that is in his power to give just to be glorified?

Once again we are confronted by a small word that gives a clue. The illness is so the Son of God may be glorified! The word may is essential to our discovery of who this Jesus is. Last week we learned that God is not some cosmic bully as He invited the participation of the man who was born blind. We learned that God gives freedom for us to live the life we choose to live even if that choice does not act in concert with God's purposes. People have the freedom to act according to their will but when they choose to pray that their will act in concert with God's will, great things can happen!

Today, as John tells the story of Mary and Martha, we learn that God does not try to manipulate people but also that God does not try to manipulate circumstances. God's glory and the glory of the Son of God will only be revealed if the circumstances allow people to choose God's will. Jesus wants us to understand that our choice to believe in God is in fact, our choice and not a predetermined and

foregone conclusion! Jesus wants us to know that life has not been decided for us and that the circumstances we confront do not have pre-determined outcomes but rather, depend upon the choices we make...the choices we are free to make!

Mary and Martha's prayer, our prayer then should not be for what we want but rather for our will to align with the will of God so that in every circumstance, God's will might be accomplished. When we pray this way, we can accept the outcome of each event as an opportunity not only for God to grant what we need but also for God to further the coming of God's Kingdom! John does not talk much about the coming of God's Kingdom. Most of that conversation is left to Matthew, Mark, and Luke; however John is extremely concerned not with our acceptance of Jesus as leader or King but as the very creator, the author of life! "All things came into being through Him, and without Him, not one thing came into being!" (John 1: 2) John wants us to know that the author of life is living with us, present in our situations so that God's glory may always be revealed!

Jesus waits two days after he hears the prayer of the sisters. He does not do this to say yes or no to Mary and Martha. He does not do this to say not now. He does this to deepen our faith...not just our faith but our faith in God! We walk to Calvary out of faith but it is important that we know the One in whom that faith is placed. Jesus waits so that Mary and Martha...so that the Jews....so that we might know! He waits two days and then He travels back to Judea! He waits and then He goes into the valley of the shadow of death! He waits and then He goes among the dry bones! He waits and then He goes to prophesy, to speak to those who are in death!

The disciples do not want Him to go! They are concerned for His life...honestly, they are concerned for their own lives! They know He has made enemies there. In chapter 10, He told those in power that they had no power over Him. He said, "I have the power to lay down my life and I have the power to take it up again!" In His claim they hear blasphemy. They hear sacrilege! They hear an end to their way of life and the comfort that comes from oppressing people in the name of religion! At the end of Chapter 9, when the Pharisees confront Jesus, He tells them their sin remains because they see their unwillingness to welcome all into God's presence and they hear his condemnation of their lifestyle; a lifestyle that according to Nicodemus denies the involvement of God in the world, according to the woman at the well condemns others for past decisions without giving them a chance to be transformed, according to the blind man causes friends and family to deny relationships out of fear of persecution! Now in answer to prayer, He steps back into the bitterness and hatred of a world that does not want God, that does not want His will to be done because it is a threat to their own world. "Light has come into the world but the world chooses darkness because its deeds are evil." (John 1)

Jesus teaches his disciples...Jesus teaches us to walk in the light. He teaches us not to fear the work of evil because evil is of this world but He has conquered this world! (John 17) What He wants to teach this morning is that the world does not know it has been conquered but in fact the victory has already been won!

So Jesus waits two days and then goes to Bethany to wake up Lazarus who has died! He communicates his mission so there can be no misunderstanding about it. When He tries to be gentle with His disciples about the truth of His mission they do not understand, so He tells them plainly. The Son of God wants there to be no doubt about His purpose in going to Bethany. He wants His disciples to be clear about the circumstance that may bring about His glory. He wants them to know they have a choice about going with Him. Thomas expresses that choice and even though it might end in death for them all, Thomas says they should go!

Here is the thing though! There is a theological math to the message John lays before us today. Mary and Martha sent their prayer to Jesus; right? Jesus gets the message and delays two days before going to Bethany. When He gets to Bethany, He discovers that Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days already. This is presented as a word problem and some do not do well with word problems so let's make this into an arithmetic equation. 4 Days in Tomb. Jesus delays 2 days. $4-2=2$. If Jesus had left at the moment He heard the prayer request, he would have arrived in Bethany 2 days after Lazarus died and not 4. When a person is dead, 2 days is really no different from 4. Lazarus is still dead.

Lazarus was going to be dead regardless of when Jesus left for Bethany. Those who want to hold out for three answers to prayer; yes, no, and not now can learn from the story this morning that there is a fourth answer. (actually I am sure there are many more than 4) This fourth reason however is the one Jesus teaches us in the "Lord's Prayer." Thy will be done! When we understand this reason, we can look beyond what we might reasonably expect from God to a faith that is deepened beyond all possibilities.

Lazarus was going to be dead so that God's will might be done, so that the fullness of God's purpose might be revealed in the circumstance. Lazarus was going to be dead so that all could learn to trust God not just with the things they believed God could accomplish but even with the things they could not reasonably believe! Lazarus was going to be dead so that the full measure of God's power could be demonstrated. Lazarus was going to be dead so that all of us might come to realize the potential of our faith. Lazarus was going to be dead so that all might come to realize that the creation of the heavens and the earth were no accident, that the possibilities for transformation of people was no accident, that

opening the eyes of the world was no accident! Lazarus was going to be dead so we could come to believe that God in Jesus has indeed overcome the world!

When Martha goes out to meet Jesus, she too has not done the theological math. She says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." We know that even if Jesus had left when He received the prayer, He would still have been too late for Lazarus, but Martha pushes at the fringes of the fullness of faith. "Even now, she says, I believe God will give whatever you ask." Martha wants to believe! She wants to acknowledge the possibility that God can go beyond the boundaries of all we know is possible. She wants to experience the fullness of faith but her reality, her loss will not allow her to do so! More growth is required.

For the third week in a row, Jesus reminds John's listeners, Jesus reminds us who He is. At the well He said, "I Am the living water!" On the road He said, "I am the Light of the World!" Today He tells us, "I Am the Resurrection and the life!" There are seven of these statements in John's gospel, each intending to clarify for us just who Jesus is! Often times we focus on the descriptive phrase (water, light, resurrection etc.) when in reality we should be focused on the claim. I Am, Jesus says. Those who were at Seder Supper last night know that I Am is the name God uses to describe Godself! I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The people were to know God not by what God does but by whose God he was. Because of the faith of the chosen, God could be known.

Today Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life! In this claim, Jesus wants Martha to remember and to believe. He wants her to think beyond the reality she sees in this world and consider the possibilities of another reality. He wants her to understand that death does not lead to end, but for all who will believe in Him, death leads to life. He wants her to move past her casting of bland to the possibility that her brother's death was for an even greater purpose!

When Mary comes out, she makes the same theological math mistake. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus does not instruct her as He did Martha; perhaps because He knows she will come to faith at a different time in her grief process. Jesus knows that we all grieve differently and that we all need him in different ways in our struggles with life. With Mary, he weeps. He demonstrates His love for her and for Martha and for Lazarus. Some misunderstand his expression and wonder about His power but we should not. Jesus was filled with compassion for those who were grieving. He knew they were caught in the death of this world and He wanted them to see beyond this world into a world where God's power is absolute!

As they come to the tomb He asks that they roll the stone away. Martha, the one who had been invited into Jesus' specific conversation about who He is protests. Jesus then reminds her...here we should not hear condemnation but encouragement...that if she will believe, God's glory will be revealed.

John Wesley, in one of his sermons on this passage says, "It is perhaps the greater power of God that He can restore hope where there was none than even that He can restore life where there was none." Wesley reminds us here that where there is no hope at all, there is still hope in God! A God that can work outside the constraints of this world can accomplish all that is necessary for all we need! That God will help us in our want but will always keep God's promise in our need!

Mary and Martha were willing to believe that Jesus could answer their prayer for healing. They had seen or heard about his restoring the sight of a blind man. They never asked for resurrection. They never imagined the possibility of a God powerful enough to overcome even death. They never imagined a God powerful enough to overcome this world!

When Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb it was not in answer to the prayers of people so faithful they would go to God with anything on their heart. It was not a yes, a no or a not now. It was so that people in the future might come to believe that He is indeed the Son of God, God's only begotten filled with every grace and truth and able to reveal the fullness of God's glory to those who are willing to see him and become the children of God! (John 1: 12-18) Jesus did not respond to Mary and Martha's prayer. He responded to ours! This morning, he pushes beyond our imagination and invites our faith in God!

Today, I wait for spring! I am tired of the dead cold colors of winter! I want warmth and sunshine and some time to ride a motorcycle and see flowers and be amazed at the color and new life that comes from the ground. I long for the new life that is the promise of another cycle in this world and I know it will come...I know it will come. I want it today! I want it now! Even though I want it, I know I must be patient for it. I can trust it will come because it always has. I have experienced it before in each and every year of my life. I can trust it. March that comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. April whose showers will lead to May's flowers are all events that I have seen and I can have faith in that which I have seen!

I wonder this morning though if I have patience to grow in faith in the things I have not seen. When faced with death will I trust God for life? When faced with challenge will I trust God for solution. When faced with seemingly impossible situations will I remember that they may be presented so that God's

glory may be revealed. Will I have the courage to say..."Never the less, not my will but thy will be done!" Will You? Amen!