



Order of service

Date: Sunday March 29th, 2020

Lent 5A

We acknowledge that we are worshipping on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung people, of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elders past and present.

Today I send you an order of service to help you work through the material better. I am including all the bits in the one document, so you don't have to chop and change from one to the other. It is kind of a long document as it contains everything, even the preaching if you choose not to watch the video of that or can't. It will not be quite the usual kind but have elements you will be familiar with.

I will give instructions in red for when things best happen. Remember you will need to read it on your computer to follow the links.

If however you just want to work through the material in your own way please feel free. A reminder you will need speakers to hear audio. And PLEASE call me or email me if things don't work.

Now let's get down to it.

Let's try a song. It is called "Gather us O God." It is just a few lines that repeat. Here are the words. Sing along as you are able. The words are also on the clip.

*Gather us O God
Body spirit soul and mind
Gather us O God
One in union now with You.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

ONE: Wait and watch for God!

ALL: **Even when we feel in the depths of death and despair?**

ONE: Wait and watch for God!

ALL: **Even when life seems like a night that never ends?**

ONE: Wait and watch for God!

In God there is constant love and kindness.

ALL: **We will wait and watch with hope.**

ONE: Let us worship God.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND CONFESSION

Life-giving God, your creative love and energy surround us, renewing and regenerating a planet that continues to evolve.

New life confronts us, even when we can't see it:

we notice signs of spring and the profusion of summer growth,

the abundance of autumn and the tenacity of life in winter.

We praise you for a world of beauty and wonder
that reflect your care and faithfulness.

Yet we are also confronted by death:

accidents and disease separate us from loved ones,
and we are especially concerned for our loved ones and ourselves during this health
crisis.

We think too of forest life and farmland that are destroyed by industry and
development;

cultures and languages disappear and people lose their sense of identity.

We acknowledge the grief and anger that are often part of loss;

we wrestle with unanswered questions and feelings of despair.

We own our tendency to give up on faith when life no longer makes sense,
or to attack the people who seem to be responsible.

We remember Jesus who declared, "I am the resurrection and the life,"
yet wept at the death of a friend. *Silence.*

Come, O Spirit!

Bring us comfort and courage when death stares us in the face.

Come, O Spirit!

Give us strength and new energy to resist

the powers of destruction and despair that undermine life. Amen.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

God does not abandon us to death and despair.

Whatever our past, whatever our fears for the future,

we are surrounded by God's compassion and steadfast love.

In God we find forgiveness and mercy.

The Spirit of Christ within you brings you life.

ALL: Thanks be to God!



EARLY WORD – Sadness is ok.

This is sadness. She is a character and frankly hero from the film Inside Out, about the emotions that live in us. Her friend Joy reckons Joy is the best and most important emotion, and that Sadness spoils everything.

But as the film goes on, we and Joy learn that Sadness has a very important place in our lives. Sadness lets us be sad when we need to be sad, and Sadness calls others to us to help us when we are sad.

Today our bible story is long and full of big things like life and death, sickness and health, anger and sadness.

In the story a friend of Jesus, called Lazarus dies, and everyone is sad. Jesus goes to see his sisters, and brings Lazarus back to life in a rather amazing story. He is

trying to make a point to everyone, which is something like, God is in control, so look to God when you need help.

But here is the thing. We all know someone who has died, someone close to us. And we know they don't come back to life like in the story.

And so we are sad, sometimes very sad. So what do we do?

Unless you live in a cave you have probably heard of the Disney film, Frozen and its famous song, Let It Go. Well Frozen 2, the sequel, has been and gone from the cinemas and is now on DVD...we have it by the way, and Kailan sings the songs very loud. Anyway there is a scene in the film where one of the main characters Anna is lost, her sister is gone feared dead, her friend Olaf a snowman, (yes snowman) has melted and gone, her fiancé has been left behind. She is alone and sad and desperate in a dark cave from which she does not know how to escape. In that space she sings a song, a very important song we could all do well to learn. Here are the words:

The Next Right Thing

*I've seen dark before, but not like this
This is cold, this is empty, this is numb
The life I knew is over, the lights are out
Hello, darkness, I'm ready to succumb
I follow you around, I always have
But you've gone to a place I cannot find
This grief has a gravity, it pulls me down
But a tiny voice whispers in my mind
You are lost, hope is gone
But you must go on
And do the next right thing
Can there be a day beyond this night?
I don't know anymore what is true
I can't find my direction, I'm all alone
The only star that guided me was you
How to rise from the floor?
But it's not you I'm rising for
Just do the next right thing
Take a step, step again
It is all that I can do
The next right thing
I won't look too far ahead
It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath, this next step
This next choice is one that I can make
So I'll walk through this night*

*Stumbling blindly toward the light
 And do the next right thing
 And, with it done, what comes then?
 When it's clear that everything will never be the same again
 Then I'll make the choice to hear that voice
 And do the next right thing*

When we are sad it is ok to be sad, but there comes a time to do something, the next right thing. It will probably be small, like today I will go outside for a walk, or I will talk to someone about it.

And today, in the world as it is right now, many of us are scared and sad and anxious. This song is for that too. Do the next right thing.

I hate to sound like I'm working for the man, but wash your hands, keep your distance from others, stay at home, look after each other and, wash your hands. Do the next right thing.

Here is a prayer.

God who is near,

Hold us close when our loved ones are out of reach.

Breathe into us when our own breath doesn't work so well.

Comfort us when our ears and minds are uncomfortable.

In this time of fear and being careful. Give us wisdom and courage

To do the next right thing.

May we love, even from a distance. Amen.

READING

Our reading today is a long one, again, from John's gospel. Grab a bible or read the verses below. It is from John 11:1-45. I have given you below a dramatized version if you have people who can read the different parts, or you can just read it by yourself.

Narrator: Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,

Messenger: Lord, he whom you love is ill.

Narrator: But when Jesus heard it, he said,

Jesus: 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.

Narrator: Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples,

Jesus: Let us go to Judea again.

A disciple: Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?

Jesus: Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.

A disciple: Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.

Narrator: Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly,

Jesus: Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.

A disciple to the others: Let us also go, that we may die with him.

Narrator: When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

Martha (to Jesus): Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.

Jesus: Your brother will rise again.

Martha: I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus: I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

Martha: Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

Narrator: When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately,

Martha (turning to Mary): The Teacher is here and is calling for you.

Narrator: And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The 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. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,

Mary: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Narrator: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, *Jesus steps away from Mary and Martha a little.*

Jesus: Take away the stone.

Martha: Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.

Jesus: Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

Narrator: So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said,

Jesus: Father, I thank you for having heard me. 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. *(With a loud voice)*, Lazarus, come out!

Narrator: 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,

Jesus: Unbind him, and let him go.

Narrator: Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PREACHING – Planning for resurrection. *(Text supplied below)*

This is a big story.

I mean it is one of the big ones in scripture that is well known, has big themes and is referred to in the wider culture when referencing issues of coming back to life.

It is big, as I said earlier for the children, because it deals with life and death, grief and anger, illness and wellness.

It is a big story also because it is personal.

Which makes it also a hard story.

Let me explain.

Some years back you may recall in country Victoria a man whose wife died. It was a while ago, so my memory is a little dim about the details of her death other than it was somewhat unusual. It was well covered by the media, and became a great news story as the husband, a member of a rather sect like Christian group, proclaimed before she was buried that his wife would rise from death.

We all waited to see what would happen. No doubt some expected she would come back to life. I can't say with any certainty, but I wonder if the husband hoped it more than expected it. I felt profoundly sorry and saddened for this man, but at the same time I was a little angry, not only at the media for making a show of it all, but at this manifestation of Christianity that had gotten it so wrong.

Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother will rise again."

She replies, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Jesus continues, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?"

That man in country Victoria believed this.

But what is it we are really being asked to believe here?

The past few Sundays the gospel passages have been taken from John like today's. John's is a gospel that works on levels and uses irony and misunderstanding to make profound points.

At a basic level Nicodemus actually thought Jesus was talking about going back into a mother's womb. The woman at the well thought Jesus was talking about actual water. In the healing of the blind man everyone thinks the issue is about actual seeing.

At a basic level, Jesus' words about believing and living and dying are not true, because Lazarus will eventually die...as will Martha, Mary and the disciples. And the words are of course ambiguous, when Jesus says, 'even if they die' and 'will live'.

The implications of such a statement would be that any believer who dies will, like Lazarus, be similarly brought back to life for a while in a literal sense.

That is what the man in country Victoria believed. He was of course, mistaken.

So this story is big, because it is personal, not just for that man, but for us too.

This story inevitably forces us to recall one of our own who has died, and somewhere inside us we want to believe the same thing as that man. "Maybe if I had done more it wouldn't have happened."

"God I would do anything, anything, if only you would bring them back."

"God you could bring them back if you wanted to, after all Jesus did it to Lazarus."

Often when this reading arises in the lectionary, we can deal with it in a rather abstract way, as if dying has nothing to do with us, only the characters in the story.

But actually, this story is where, as they say, the rubber hits the road.

Today we hear this story, and we cannot pretend it is about someone else's dying.

It is about the dying of people we love...a family member of someone we know and love...a real person whom you have known personally, have loved and still miss enormously. And the words of the song "The next right thing" might still echo true for you.

In 1991 when I was ministering at Traralgon Uniting Church in a not quite ordained capacity, three people from my home church at Ringwood in a period of three months died. They were all key people in the congregation. They were all greatly loved and respected. They were all influential on my life and faith.

Their passing obviously was a great loss for their immediate families. But it was also a great loss for the community of faith of which they were a part.

This is the same for you folk too. When we choose to live as community, when one of our own dies, we feel the loss terribly. We weep, we grieve, and we sorrow at lost opportunities and hopes.

At such times the community reacts emotionally, which is to be expected.

At such times we might withdraw into the faith that wants the person magically brought back to life, or the faith that says "Don't be sad because they are with God," or the faith that somehow forgets that my own death is inevitable also.

Jesus wept. Love weeps.

I believe fervently that God weeps with us in our loss, because God gets it.

Being human is about dealing with the richness and complexity of our emotional lives, and this cannot be brushed aside with a glib comment like – don't be sad they are with God now.

For me it is actually this that is the expression of inadequate faith.

John the gospel writer, time and again confronts the issue of inadequate faith.

"Nicodemus it is not about going back into your mother's womb; woman it is not real water at stake here; people it is not physical blindness being addressed!"

Like being born again, and living water, and light of the world, these words of Jesus are working at another level.

The point of the saying, and ultimately of the passage as a whole, is to make and celebrate the claim that people who believe in Jesus find life.

It is eternal life, which includes timelessness or eternity in the chronological sense, but the focus is quality not quantity.

It is sharing the life of God here and now and forever.

The claim behind Jesus' word to Martha is a springboard to jump to a different level of reality that leaves the original story behind and no longer applies to it. People who remain at the basic level of the story will have a faith like that of Martha and Mary.

They need to move beyond that.

If they do not, they will be left looking for the next miracle and failing to see, that from John's perspective the miracles are signs of something else. Like I said last week, the signs point us to God, to move towards God, not stand there staring at the sign.

And if we do not make this movement, we will be left ever fearful of death, never prepared for its coming, never able to deal with its arrival, be it someone else's or our own.

I often wonder, whether people like me, have done a disservice to the church by not putting the reality of death before us all, more frequently other than at times of funerals.

We teach about how to live, but rarely about how to die, maybe because we don't know how ourselves.

You may recall that on the March long weekend the boys and I attended the Synod family camp at Creswick. We go each year and have done since it began 10 years ago.

The people who attend are largely peers who were all involved in the hey-day of youth ministry in Victoria and the UCA camping scene.

As we had children, we yearned for our children to have something of what we had experienced, and thus the family camp was born.

We are all 10 years older now, and our children are growing up, but it is still important for all of us.

This year we had a rather different activity on the Saturday evening.

We had picnic blanket chat groups. On Saturday evening after dinner, we broke into groups via a ridiculously complicated manner, of mixed ages – adults, young adults, teenagers, children. The aim was to have an informal chat about stuff. Each group was given an envelope with cards that had conversation starters on them, or else we could chat about baptism, confirmation.

Most people knew each other already or knew of them. We began chatting about baptism, like do you remember yours, have you seen one, what was it like, what does it mean. Our group chatted around that for a while which was very interesting, then we came to a lull. The adult next to me suggested pulling a card out, so we all pulled out a card and she read hers first – Are you afraid of dying?

You could feel initially a kind of chill, like, this is a bit of a downer, but then someone began to talk, then the flood gates opened.

People were sharing their thoughts around dying, death, beyond death, and the younger ones were very vocal, I suspect because it was not something they get to talk about much.

One young boy commented that he couldn't get his head around what would happen to his consciousness after he died. Surely that just didn't disappear.

Another teenage girl noted that she lived life moving through things that had to be done, she would finish one task, it was complete, then let's move on to the next, very methodical. She likewise found difficulty with the notion that with death it was a once for all finished task, nothing more to do. She couldn't conceive that there was a finality to it, that there was not a process that kept going even after dying.

And others shared equally as deeply. It was quite frankly one of the most extraordinary and moving conversations I have been part of in that kind of setting. The kids and young people were amazing in what they thought about it all and were hungry to talk about it hear what others thought.

Death is on their minds.

With the Corona virus it is even more so. People are dying of this illness. It is no small thing. Young people are anxious about it, as are most of us.

This passage from John puts us smack bang into the middle of the reality of death. It is hard, it is sad, it wears us down, we get angry, we ask why and what if, and it is relentless.

But this story takes us to a place beyond that thinking.

We need the grieving we feel for our loved ones who have gone, to teach us, to force us to travel the difficult journey and discover that at its end is something quite unexpected.

I think we also need Jesus to do that with us. He teaches us how to live but he also teaches us how to die. He prepares us by showing us how to embrace death and dying, to accept it not as our end but as the beginning of our new self who no longer lives for the self-alone but for the sake of others.

Let's not pretend that this is an easy task. It is not. It is hard work. But we don't need to do it alone.

We have this community, even as we are dispersed at the moment, within which to do the work of living and dying.

We truly are all in this together.

Together we do the next right thing.

Together we get up, and do not be afraid.

Christ, let me come and die with you.

To you who do miracles, but not always,

I confess that I want you to fix things,

make me an exception, excuse me from pain,

save me from darkness, keep me from death.

But you do not go that way, do you?

You walk through the valley of shadows,

the weakness, the loss, the regret.

No escape is required. There is no blame.

It is the valley where we live, this light

and shadowed place, the life we have,

a journey of surrender, every landmark

a gravestone. Yet here, in this darkness,

you are present, loving, and listening,

You make a holy space for my grieving,

my anger, my doubt, my fear.

And in that holy space you make a door

and walk through it, and bid me come,

to let go of all I cling to, all my old life,

all that's crushed by grief and ruined by loss;

not to avoid death but to be transformed,

not to stay happy but to die and be raised.

You bid me come, be Martha, empty handed;

be Thomas, willing and self-giving;

be Christ, weeping for love, weeping.

You bid me come, be Lazarus, wrapped

in the bands of my self, my little life,

settled in my tomb and the death of my powers,

*hearing your voice,
"Come out!"
I am unbound!
(Pastor Steve)*

Let's sing again. This is from Together in Song, I hope you know it. Again the words are below and the words will come up in the clip also. It is TIS 637, if you have a copy of the book.

1

Lord of the living, in your name assembled,
we join to thank you for the life remembered.
Father, have mercy, to your children giving
hope in believing.

2

Help us to treasure all that will remind us
of our enrichment in the days behind us.
Your love has set us in the generations,
God of creation.

3

May we, whenever tempted to dejection,
strongly recapture thoughts of resurrection.
You gave us Jesus to defeat our sadness
with Easter gladness.

4

Lord, you can lift us from the grave of sorrow
into the presence of your own tomorrow;
give to your people in this day's affliction
your benediction.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Life-giving God, like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, we are loved by you.

We think of this family and the way they opened their home to others,
providing care and companionship to Jesus and his friends.

We pray for our homes, even at this time, but certainly beyond this current climate,
that they may be places where others can find life-giving relationships.

Spirit of God, breathe new life in us!

Also like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, we are different from one another.

Martha was practical and clear about what she believed.

Thank you for those who use their skills and abilities to care for others.

We pray that their faithfulness and dependability will bring hope to those who are not
sure of their faith and find it hard to believe in you and in other people. We need this
more than ever right now.

Spirit of God, breathe new life in them!

Mary loved deeply and felt the pain of loss and desertion.

We pray for those who have experienced the loss of those they love, those for whom relationships have brought disappointment, those whose trust has not been honoured.

May they may find comfort in their sadness and courage to reach out again to others.

Spirit of God, breathe new life in them!

Lazarus had faced illness and death.

We pray for all who face life-threatening illness or injuries,

those paralyzed by fear or anxiety and those for whom depression or difficulties make life painful or seem like not worth living.

Help us all to face our mortality, knowing that there are limits to our energy and there will be an end to our life and strength, but never an end to your loving presence.

Spirit of God, breathe new life in us!

In a short time of silence we bring our own prayers to God.

Silence.

Hear our prayers, silent and spoken, and help us to be part of the answer to these requests. We offer them in the name of the one who gave us His prayer:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

and forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and forever. Amen.

BLESSING

When you struggle to believe, or doubt your belief,

don't waste time looking at Jesus' papers

to see his credentials,

or bother checking on his job description.

No opinion, however pious,

will save you when you are drowning

or overflow in love of neighbour.

Just wonder: what have you seen?

How have you been touched?

*When might the Hidden One have walked beside you,
spoken to you, healed you?
That experience of light or warmth,
that opening of your heart like a door,
that inexplicable gift,
that unseen hand holding yours in the darkness—
might that have been he?*

*Whatever it is that makes you feel one with others,
that gives you uncreated love for them,
that offers hope where there is none,
that has brought you this far,
whatever it is that gives you your hunger for Life,
and then gives you Life, gives you this next breath—
believe in that.*

*The eyes that are opened are within.
If you can't believe in spring, believe in this one daffodil.
No matter what you think you believe,
close your eyes, remember, and give thanks.
It will be the Holy One speaking to you.*

Whatever this week brings for us individually, communally,
Remember we are blessed.
Even by yourself or with a few others
Live knowing you are blessed
In the name of the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Final Song. This has been our theme song during Lent. We missed it last week but here it is now.

DON'T BE AFRAID

Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,
My love is stronger than your fear.
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger,
And I have promised,
Promised to be always near.