

SERMON TITLE: "Finding Hope in the Midst of Crisis"

SERMON TEXT: John 11:1-6, 17-27, 38-44

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: March 29, 2020, via Facebook Live Worship during Coronavirus Season

INTRODUCTION

Is anyone out there struggling? Are you feeling weird and out of sorts? Me too. I've found myself on edge, more irritable than normal. I hate to admit how much junk food I've been stress eating. Remember my stash of Hershey kisses I told you about last week? Well, they're all gone now, along with all my Girl Scout cookies, and all my pretzels. And a couple nights this past week I had strange dreams that I actually remembered after I woke up. Those are all indicators of trouble for me . . . indicators that have occurred even when the coronavirus hasn't affected me all that directly.

Unlike other people who have suffered with COVID-19 sickness, seen their loved ones die, been forced into quarantine, lost their jobs and their livelihood—or medical professionals who have had to put themselves in imminent risk every day while caring for us—my life has been a breeze. I personally don't know anyone who has died from coronavirus, or even gotten sick or had a confirmed case. But, still, because we have to take these social distancing measures; because we've had to cancel trips and activities into which we had invested time, money, and hopes; because we've all had steep learning curves to do new things in new ways; because we can't get all those hugs and other physical interactions that we're used to; and because of the uncertainty of so many things—*anxiety is in the air that we breathe. Stress is in our minds and our bodies. I've been feeling it, and I bet you've been feeling it too.*

One really good article that I read this past week indicated that this discomfort we're feeling is actually grief. The loss of normalcy, the loss of certainty, the loss of activities that we enjoy, the loss of physical closeness with our friends, the loss of school, the loss of sports, and the loss of life have all been compounding grief upon us.

That's why I decided to change my sermon topic for today. Since the coronavirus pandemic has forced us to change so many things, I figured it would be OK to take a detour from our Lenten series on "The Seven Deadly Sins." We'd been working through that list since the end of February, and Lust was the sin scheduled for today. While some of you may have been sitting on the edge of your seats in anticipation of that topic, to me, it seemed more helpful to acknowledge the distress that we're all feeling and see if we could find some hope in the midst of the crisis.

JOHN 11 HAS PARALLELS FOR TODAY

So, we turn our attention this morning to John chapter 11. There we find the story of the illness, death, and resurrection of Lazarus. We like this story because it has a happy ending. But it doesn't begin that way. And before we get to the end, there's a lot of messiness that's not so different from the difficulties we've been experiencing. Let's look at some of the parallels.

First of all, there was an **illness that actually caused death**. We don't know what was wrong with Lazarus. Back in the time of Jesus, even the smallest of illnesses could lead to death. Before antibiotics, a small injury or an abscessed tooth could easily become a fatal infection. Before vaccines and scientifically-proven cures, lifespans were very short.

That reality of Lazarus' illness is something we can relate to now, in our own time of coronavirus. Even though scientists know a lot about infectious diseases, this particular COVID-19 is still a pretty big mystery. Tests are in short supply, and the ones that exist aren't 100% accurate. Personal protective equipment and treatment ventilators are largely unavailable. And cures and preventative vaccines haven't yet been established. We, like Lazarus and his sisters, are living in a time when illness is deadly. As of this morning, I saw that COVID-19 had killed more than 32,000 worldwide, more than 2200 in the U.S., and two in Utah. And those numbers are constantly climbing.

A **second** parallel between the Lazarus story and our own is that it's **hard to know exactly what to do**. In John 11, we see that Mary and Martha thought the situation was serious enough to send a

message to Jesus. But Jesus didn't think Lazarus' condition would kill him. Or maybe the Jesus-who-was-human-as-well-as-divine was experiencing the human denial that goes with grief: No. Nope. Certainly not. This cannot be happening to my dear friend. So Jesus decided to stay in place for two days more. But even then, when he told his disciples that he was ready to go, they tried to talk him out of it. The negotiation is there in verses seven through 16. There's fear that if Jesus and the disciples go to Judea again, it will be very dangerous, maybe even deadly for all of them.

The disciples and Jesus weren't afraid of catching the illness that Lazarus had. They were concerned about the growing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. They were having to decide: should they retreat back out into the countryside, or should they go with Jesus into Jerusalem so he could proclaim his message more fully? That would have been a danger and a risk no matter what. But now Lazarus' situation was forcing the timing.

And don't we feel these decision-making pressures too? This coronavirus is a terrible sickness, and all alone it would be more than enough of a problem for us. But the coronavirus didn't come all by itself, did it? COVID-19 came on top of everything else we were already dealing with: physical aches and pains, business and personal financial struggles, relationship issues, goals and projects to complete, activities to organize, responsibilities to manage, and even fun trips that we had planned to take.

And now, we have to make decisions. Do we give up on the new project that we have worked so hard to create? Do we cancel our flight? Do we postpone our wedding? Our Vacation Bible School team just decided that we'd better not plan to hold our annual children's event in June this year. Maybe we can try to have it in early August instead. Maybe. I was talking with some clergy colleagues a couple days ago about how to manage funerals during this siege. When people can't get together in person, do we postpone memorial services for months and months, or do we hold them digitally via Facebook Live or Zoom? Yes, eventually, we will have to make decisions of some kind. Do we go or not? If so, do we go now, or do we go later? Or will we have to decide again next month? Or the month after that?

A **third** parallel point of this story of Lazarus is that our **emotions are going to be exposed**. If the men were worried about conflict with the Jewish authorities, the women were risking their emotional vulnerability in regard to their brother's illness and death. It's not easy to ask for help, even from someone you love and whom you believe loves you. But then to be put off by days? And with such devastating results?

Martha and Mary were stressed and concerned by their emotions. If they went out to talk with Jesus, would they break down in tears? Would they lash out at Jesus because he wasn't able to do what they asked? Would they unfairly accuse him of not caring enough to come quickly? Would they not be able to control their anger, their sadness, their grief? And/or, maybe the women were worried about adding the burden of their emotions on top of what they knew Jesus himself would already be feeling. Certainly Jesus did care about Lazarus and about the sisters. Verse 33 tells us that, when Jesus saw Mary and the Jews weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Verse 35 poignantly tells us that Jesus wept.

Sometimes our greatest fear is not what's happening around us but what's happening inside us. We're afraid our emotions will be devastatingly raw and that we won't be able to manage them. For sure, this coronavirus time is one in which we're all trying to hold ourselves together. And, truthfully, it's not easy. It's not easy to be quarantined all alone without physical access to friends, family, and work. In our loneliness, we can feel abandoned even by God.

And, conversely, it's not easy to be cooped up with your family, especially if your house is small. Even the most loving parents can get stressed out by having their children with them 24/7. Trying to work from home while keeping kids on task with homeschooling is pretty tough. I heard one radio commentator talk about the pressures inherent in eating his food storage beans, when the family is stuck indoors. While that may strike us as funny, I've also been hearing news stories about the rising numbers of domestic violence calls because emotional and physical abuse typically increases in times

when people are trapped together and isolated away from other members of their communities. Like the emotions of the Lazarus story, our emotions are real, and they do sometimes feel out of control.

CONCLUSION

And that's why this one last parallel is such good news for us. Even **in the midst of crisis there is hope**. Even when the disciples were afraid, when Jesus wept, when Mary and Martha felt hurt, and when Lazarus suffered a sickness that actually killed him—**God's glory was there to be revealed**. When the stone was moved from the tomb and Jesus called for Lazarus to come out, he did. God raised Lazarus from the dead. The Gospel of John doesn't tell us how long Lazarus lived after that. For sure, he eventually died again from something. But on that day in John 11—in the midst of deadly illness, decision confusion, and emotional grief, God's glory was revealed in an amazing and powerful way.

Our hope and our prayer today is that God's glory will be revealed again. We pray that the tragic horror of coronavirus death will come to an end. We pray that God will roll away the stone that traps us indoors, confined in grief about what has happened and in fear of what more could occur. Just like Jesus stayed in place some days before he arrived at Lazarus' tomb, we may have to wait. Just like the sisters were upset that it took Jesus so long to come, we no doubt will be distressed at the length of time our current situation requires. But we can be certain that Jesus loves us and is coming. We can be certain that God's glory is here ready to be revealed when the time is right. Like Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Jesus, and all the others, this is how we find hope in the midst of crisis.