

Lent 5, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today
is the fifth Sunday in Lent,
the fifth Sunday
of this time of preparation
where we follow our savior into the wilderness
where everything is stripped bare
and exposed to the scorching heat of the sun,
where we are forced to acknowledge
the reality of sin
and death
and place ourselves
in the hands
of the God whom we trust
will have mercy on us.

Next week
we will be confronted
with the fickleness of the crowds
who one day
are welcoming Christ into the city
with their Hosanna cries,
and just a few days later
bay for blood,
Crucify him! Crucify him!

But now, this Sunday
we have what in hindsight
is a hint
of what is to come
after the nose dies down,
after the crowds melt away,
when the only ones left are the women
standing by the cross,
following his body to the tomb,
washing his body
and keeping watch.

And that is the story
of Martha and Mary
and their brother,
Lazarus.
Usually
when we read this story
we focus on
the happy ending,
we leap to the moment
when Lazarus
comes out of the tomb.

But have you ever thought
what it must have been like for the sisters
in the hours, the days before?
Their brother
was ill, so ill
that they contacted his friends
so they could see him
one last time.
And among those friends
was Jesus,
and he was not just a friend
but also the one
who had healed people. Maybe, maybe
if he got there in time
he would be able
to heal Lazarus
too.

So Martha and Mary
sent Jesus a message.
“Your friend is ill. Please come.”
And then they waited,
and waited
and Lazarus
became sicker,
and still
there was no sign
of Jesus.

And then he died.
Lazarus, their protector,

their provider,
their beloved brother
died.
And the sisters were devastated.
They wrapped him in grave cloths and spices,
and held a funeral,
and placed his body in a tomb.
And then rolled a stone in front of it
to seal it.

And four days later,
four days later
the word went round the village
that Jesus
had been seen on the road.

And Martha
rushed out to him:
“Lord, if you had been here...”
And in those words
we hear all the despair
and the yearning
of those days spent waiting.

And we know
that sort of yearning and fear.
Some of us have experienced it acutely this Lent
as we waited by Margie Kreussling’s bed,
hoping against hope
that she would wake up,
and knowing, knowing deep within
that it was unlikely.

My family experienced it
as we waited for months
to find out if there was someone willing to donate stem cells
who was a match for Lockey,
and then the four long weeks after his transplant,
when at times we weren’t sure
whether he would live or die.

Others in our parish are waiting,
waiting

as they watch their own bodies or the bodies of those dear to them
gradually succumb
to illness and age,
waiting and wondering
how their troubled children and grandchildren
will make it through adolescence and early adulthood,
waiting and fearing
as they look at the economy
and struggle with how to pay their bills
and feed their households.

And all of us wait, all of us wait
for the redemption of God,
that final promise
that one day
heaven and earth
will be restored,
and everything will be made new,
and our tears will be wiped away
and we will see God
in glory.

But for now we wait.

And it struck me as I read our psalm for today
how much it speaks
to this experience of waiting.

“Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD,” says the psalmist;
“LORD, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.”

The psalmist
speaks of that experience
that so many of us have, especially at this point in the year.
We are overwhelmed.
We may even be clinically depressed.
In spite of the longer days,
we find it hard
to see anything
beyond the darkness around us.
Or as the poet Stevie Smith said,
we are “not waving but drowning”.

The temptation is
to retreat,
to hide in a corner
and hope it will all go away.
But here we have
an invitation
not to hide
but to call out
to God.

To scream and yell and cry to God
about how we are feeling.
To ask God
to hear us.

For many of us
who have been brought up with the idea
that we have to be careful
about how we speak to God,
we sometimes struggle
to be honest with God.
We are afraid
that if we speak out of turn
God might not only not hear us
but might be angry,
and punish us.
And therefore
we control our emotions, control our tongues
and only offer God
a sanitized version
of ourselves.

But here the psalmist
is honest,
here the psalmist
speaks out of the depths of despair,
knowing that
none of us
has the right to stand before God,
and God has every right
to zap us,
but that God is merciful.

God is merciful.

If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?

For there is forgiveness with you;
therefore you shall be feared.

With God there is forgiveness.
No matter what we have done,
no matter how we have failed,
no matter how dark our lives are,
God offers forgiveness.

And the fear, the fear that this speaks of
is not fear as we normally understand it,
the sense of being afraid,
but in Hebrew carries the idea of awe, wonder, amazement mystery astonishment, gratitude,
admiration
and even worship.

We cry out to God
in despair
and the God who is merciful,
the God who forgives,
the God whose grace
is beyond measure
hears us.

And we wait.
We wait like Mary
who echoed her sister's words
as she cried out to Jesus,
"If only you'd
come sooner."
We wait like the women at the tomb
who just wanted to stay close to their friend and savior.
We wait.

And we wait,
not just in despair,
not just crying out,
not just in silence,

we wait
in hope.

“I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope.

My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, wait for the LORD,
for with the LORD there is mercy;

With him there is plenteous redemption,
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.”

Sometimes
when we wait
we just wait.
At the train station.
At the cash register.
In the darkness of night.

But the psalmist sees waiting
as something more. Waiting
is not passive,
it is active.
We are waiting for something.
Like watchmen
waiting not just for signs of some nefarious activity,
turning their eyes from the streets below to the horizon
for the signs of dawn
when the dark shadows will recede
and light and color will return again,
like gardeners waiting for plants to bloom,
not just sitting back but clearing dead branches of winter and trimming the once seed-laden
heads of perennials,
digging the soil to loosen and refresh it
adding compost,
scattering seed.

Waiting for God
praying,

reading scripture,
praising God,
and looking for where God
might come to us.

In a chance encounter,
in an act of service,
in a smile or a laugh
or a hug.

Waiting

with expectation and hope,
because God will come to us.

And God will indeed come to us
with mercy
and redemption
and blessing.

And for Martha
the first sign

was the words of 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.”

Martha and Mary were blessed.

In the end

their waiting

was rewarded,

rewarded with a brother

who came out of his tomb,

alive.

For the women at the tomb
their waiting was rewarded

too,

rewarded by a savior

who rose again

and offered resurrected life.

For us,

our waiting will be rewarded.

Not perhaps

as we expect.

But God will hear us.

And so wait, along with Martha and Mary,

and the women at the tomb, we wait for the one
who will make dry bones live.

Wait
for the Lord.

Wait for the Lord
whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord,
Be strong take heart.