

Lent 5: Sunday 29 March 2020  
The Reverend Sarah Park

John 11:1-44  
Online

Like many of you, I have been watching a LOT of TV lately.  
(So much for that Lenten sacrifice!)  
John and I recently finished watching  
an excellent Netflix series called Giri/Haji.  
It is a Japanese/English series about crime families in Japan.

One of the methods they used to tell the story  
was to split the screen in two or more  
and have multiple story lines happening simultaneously  
in different panels. It was very effective.  
Stories in parallel.

If I was to make a movie about this rather extraordinary month  
(and I've no doubt that there are already  
many being planned around the world),  
then this is a visual tool I'd use.  
Because there are at least two stories happening for us  
at the moment.

The detailed one contained in our particular bubble –  
where we are dealing with the here and now our own interior life,  
the interpersonal stuff between us and those we love  
while trying to find creative ways to pass the time.  
For not much going on, there's a lot going on.

Then there is the big story happening in parallel outside our door,  
the meta-narrative.

It comes to us via regular press conferences  
and includes numbers and graphs  
and the reiteration of key messages: stay home, save lives.

The meta-narrative and the here and now appear to be separate,  
but they are not. In fact they are intricately related.  
For the big story is the reason that we are in isolation.  
And what we do in our bubbles (or more importantly don't do)  
in the here and now of our story in turn  
contributes to the big story.

The same dynamic is present in this story of the raising of Lazarus.  
The first story, the detail, is the here and now of the sisters.  
Theirs is a very compelling story of fear and death and grief,  
of anger and recrimination.  
Mary and Martha were good friends of Jesus  
and so they have every expectation that he will turn up  
and DO something about their sick brother.  
There is lots in their story we can relate to;  
particularly in this season where fear  
and the threat of death dominates our narrative.

Jesus on the other hand, is occupying a different narrative.  
The meta-narrative.  
He seems unconcerned to the point of cavalier  
as he delays making the journey to be with his friends.  
He speaks of these events not in terms of  
their currency in the here and now but in terms of

giving glory to God.  
He speaks about his identity as the resurrection and the life.  
Jesus is pointing to a meta-narrative.

But there is a pivot-point in this story,  
at which the meta-narrative that Jesus is living out,  
and the detail of the sisters' here and now meets.  
It is at the shortest verse in the bible.  
You know it from those days when memory verses were a thing:  
Jesus wept. Or in our translation: Jesus began to weep.

Jesus can't have been crying for Lazarus.  
All along he has said that the detail of Lazarus' illness and death  
would give glory to God. So what were his tears for?

His tears are for the sisters.  
These two women he has loved and been loved by.  
These two women who are  
crippled by grief at their brother's death  
and confused by and angry with Jesus' inaction.

Jesus weeps for **them**.  
Even knowing what he presumably knows,  
he is moved by compassion.

Compassion is a Latin word, with means to suffer with.

Jesus enters into the sisters' here and now and suffers with them.  
He stands alongside them right where they are at.

From here the story begins to move again.  
Jesus goes to the tomb and commands Lazarus to come out.  
Having stood in the messy middle of things, Jesus is able to take  
the sisters, Lazarus and their story with him to a bigger story,  
where death is not the final word and hope resides.

Whether we know it or not, we are always living in this split  
reality: between the here and now of our daily lives and big  
picture of God's story in the world.

As Christians we are called to occupy both narratives.  
We are called to be dual citizens.  
To be in the messy middle of the here and now,  
where it is frequently painful and confusing and frightening.  
To really be here – standing alongside others.  
AND to hold an awareness of the big picture  
in which hope triumphs over fear, and love is stronger than death.

The risk of this period in which we find ourselves  
is that the only thing getting enough oxygen is our fear.  
Fear is fueled by not being allowed out.  
By the sudden presence of police quietly enquiring  
whether our journey is absolutely necessary.  
By the alarming statistics we hear about infection rates  
in our country and around the world.

Fear gets into our nostrils and permeates everything else.

Steven Charleston, a retired first nations Bishop from the US,  
wrote this this week:

“Fear is real because it grows from what is real:  
real suffering, real loss, real death.  
But it is never as strong as faith:  
real courage, real compassion, real love.  
It may overwhelm, for the moment, but it can never overcome.  
Yes, the struggle with fear is one of the  
hardest challenges we face. No point pretending otherwise.  
[But] One of the things I have learned over so many years of  
service to the Spirit is to look fear in the eye.  
I can do that because if it comes to a test of wills between us,  
I know which one of us is stronger.  
[fear will never look hope in the eye. It is a bully.  
It will look away and, in time, it will run.  
Stand your ground, people of faith,  
and let your hope stare fear down whenever it raises its head.”

At the end of this story of Lazarus is an interesting little detail.  
Lazarus, awoken from death – the last and most dramatic of  
seven signs performed by Jesus in John’s Gospel –  
staggers out of the tomb in his grave clothes.  
And Jesus commands the onlookers to  
“Unbind him, and let him go!”

This reminds us “that even God’s work of resurrection  
calls for our participation. David Lose explains it like this:  
“It’s not so much that God needs us to do God’s work of  
resurrection, it’s that God’s work of resurrection isn’t limited  
simply to those whose life is renewed in the moment

but [rather it] finds its fulfillment as it also catches up, impacts,  
even transforms those who witness and are drawn into it.

“Unbind him, and let him go!” is an invitation to be drawn into  
God’s life-giving work, to participate in, extend, and in some sense  
complete the reach of God’s mighty acts.”

We are called to stand in the here and now with those who suffer.  
To be really present. To suffer with. To have compassion.

We are also called to live out a narrative  
that speaks of the goodness of God  
and a belief that even in the face of loss,  
the last word has not been spoken.  
We are called to bring these two narratives together in the way  
that we live and speak.  
And when moments of resurrection – both large and small –  
happen around us we called to participate – to name them,  
to be changed by them, and ultimately to complete them as we  
partner with God in this broken and beautiful world.  
Amen.