



The Cross of Life

Old Testament: Ezekiel 37:1-14

New Testament: John 11:1-45

Text: John 11:25-26

Life is filled with contradictions.

Living with these contradictions is the great challenge of faith.

We believe God wants justice. Yet the sun shines equally on the just and unjust alike. We yearn for peace in life. But we make war in order to achieve peace. Babies are life's most precious gift. But it takes great pain to deliver a baby, and even more pain to raise an infant to be an adult.

We want joy in life. But joy comes with a cost. For those of us who want a joyful life without cost, we're going to be dissatisfied. No one rises to the top of life's mountain of joy without overcoming obstacles and difficulties on the way up. No one moves mountains without filling valleys and bridging rough places.

We want freedom. But one person's freedom is another's burden. Freedom requires responsibility. With responsibility comes accountability. With accountability comes compassion for others that limits our freedom.

Wanting God to satisfy our wants and desires without a cost is unrealistic. Believing in a God who corrects our transgressions without pain and suffering is a fantasy. Thinking God created us without transgression, and thinking we live without transgressing God or each other is a contradiction to our experience. Being created without transgression and living without transgression is to be God.



Who among us can claim to be God?

Lent is the season for us to admit we aren't God. More importantly, Lent is the time to face that we need the Cross' for us to live.

Each rough place in life is a time we encounter the Cross. The Cross stands wherever life is overwhelming and difficult. But the Cross is also the means by which we discover life. It provides the gift of life.

Mary and Martha are like many people. They wanted God to heal their brother Lazarus so he wouldn't die. They believed that Jesus a miracle worker who could do remarkable things. They knew Jesus could save Lazarus from his illness.

But their faith in Jesus wasn't in the reality of life that Jesus was giving. Their faith was built around God satisfying their own limited view of life. They wanted God to prevent them from feeling the pain of death.

They didn't understand the relationship of the Cross to life. Life isn't about avoiding the Cross. Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to heal Lazarus so they could avoid losing their brother.

Jesus understood what they wanted. But what they wanted wasn't the way life works under God. He knew Lazarus' condition. He also knew the limits of their faith. God didn't give the world life without the cost of death. There is a price to living. And a cost to live without dying.

If Mary and Martha wanted Lazarus to live without dying, then Lazarus would have to die first. The only place a person can live without facing death is heaven. Lazarus would have to die first in this world to gain the gift of life without death in heaven.



And so, Jesus waited until Lazarus had passed away before He came to Mary and Martha's home. They had to face the Cross of dying before they would understand the blessing of life God was giving them.

Life – eternal life – life without pain and suffering – can't be seen without the Cross. Joy – eternal joy – wonderful joy – can't be seen without the Cross. Love – eternal love – merciful love – can't be seen without the Cross. Mary and Martha had to experience the Cross before they could understand the gift of new life from God.

It took Lazarus' death for Mary and Martha to accept the resurrection. Even so, it took Lazarus' death only partially revealed the resurrection to Mary and Martha. Lazarus' death only began Mary and Martha's acceptance of God's gift of the resurrection.

"I am the resurrection and the life; anyone who believes in me, even if he dies, will come to life. And everyone who is alive and believes in me shall never die at all." Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Seeing Jesus is seeing the resurrection. Jesus raised Lazarus from death to life. Mary and Martha had to experience Lazarus' loss to comprehend the magnificence of Jesus raising the dead.

Without Lazarus in the grave for four days, Mary and Martha would not have grasped Jesus' power to give new life. Jesus' delay in answering their request to come and health their brother showed them far more about who Jesus was, and the resurrection power the Father had given Jesus, than if Jesus had immediately come and prevented Lazarus' death.



This story about Lazarus faces life's contradictions. Life isn't easy to find joy when we are surrounded by signs of death.

The coronavirus threatens us so that it's hard for us to find joy in this life. News headlines build fear and its up to us to find that source of joy in this world despite the contradiction that we believe God is love. We have that belief because Jesus took us through the Cross and beyond it to see God's love that saves the world.

When we believe Jesus has saved us, God lifts us beyond this challenge to our faith to see t he new life He has given us beyond. When we rely on Jesus' power to save us, we look through the shadow of death cast by the Cross to see the glory of the new life to come.

The Cross of Life is the gate of death through which all of us must walk. We can't get to the other side of life without passing through death first. Every loss we experience in this life is a Cross we must carry. But when we trust in Jesus' power to give us new life in the resurrection, we won't wait until we're on the other side of the Cross to find joy.

Joy is God's gift when what Jesus has done for you and me is our first thought each day. Joy bursts forth from the grave of the Cross. Jesus' power to save us generates joy in the face of death.

Our joy comes from knowing He is coming in glory to take us with Him to where there is no more death or suffering, and life is forevermore.



We see through the New Testament examples of Christians living with joy and courage despite facing the Cross.

- I Peter 4:12-13 says, “Beloved don’t be surprised by at the ordeal that is taking place among you, to test you, as though something stranger were happening to you. Rejoice as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when His glory is revealed.”
- Hebrews 12:11-12 says, “God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share His holiness. Now discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time. But later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.”
- Phil. 4:4-8 says, “Rejoice in the Lord Always; again I will say rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things!”



The coronavirus is our cross this Lent. It is a strange time for us that is an ordeal to our faith in God, and our trust in each other. We are experiencing the discipline of our freedom before the virus' dark shadow.

We are receiving daily messages of suffering and death that are driving us apart from one another. And its easy in such a time to let it all drive us away from God.

Our joy doesn't lie in a vaccine. Nor does our joy lie in distancing ourselves from the Cross. Our joy comes from being close to Jesus, carrying the Cross with Him, and believing in the new life He has given us beyond this Cross.

We have nothing to fear. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Paul writes in Col. 3:1-4, that our joy today comes from keeping focused on Jesus, not the headlines and promises of worldly governments. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

When our joy is in Christ, "Neither height nor depth, nor length nor breadth, nor powers and principalities, nor things present nor things to come can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."

We know this from the Cross of Life. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us!

Amen.