

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
Contemporary & Bridge Services
April 2, 2017

Like Us in Every Way: A Man of Sorrows

*He is despised and rejected of men;
a man of sorrows,
and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3 KJV).*

John 11:1-45, Selected Verses

The message for today prepares us for a day of sorrow. It is a day that every one of us will experience if we live long enough. It is the day when someone whom we love dies. How do we deal with that sorrow? How do we survive it? Today we can be thankful that Jesus is like us in every way. Isaiah 53:3 says, "He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (KJV). He was a man of sorrows. And as our Savior, he leads the way not only in those days of joy and gladness but especially in those days of sorrow.

When someone you love dies, it is not unusual to feel that God is incredibly distant. Questions arise in our minds.

- Why did this happen?
- Where is God?
- Doesn't he love me?
- Didn't he love the one who died?

As we look at this account of the death of Lazarus we see that this man of sorrows is first of all a man of emotions. He loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ... ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Lazarus died. Mary and Martha could have concluded: Jesus doesn't care. Jesus doesn't love Lazarus. Jesus doesn't love us. But that was not the case at all.

If only this text said to each of us, "Jesus loved ... your name here and your loved ones and the name of the deceased." But there is no text that says that Jesus loves us even in the face of death.

Or is there?

Isn't your name found in John 3:16? Isn't your family members' and friends' names found there? God so loved the world. Your name is there because you are part of the world.

In the movie *The Shack* that recently came out, God the Father says about everyone, "I'm especially fond of him." The main character Mack finally asks, "Is there anyone you are not 'especially fond of'?"

The answer is obvious when you look at Jesus. God is "especially fond" of everyone, so much so that he gave Jesus into death for our sins. Even in the face of death, you can be sure of God's love.

Jesus is a man of emotions. And those emotions mean that he is also a man of sorrow in the face of death.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

The words translated "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" more literally can be translated, "He was angered in spirit and shook."

Jesus is a man of emotions in the face of death. Death is not natural. Jesus understands that. Death is the ultimate reminder that this world is not the way God created it. Sin came into the world, and with sin came death. Death comes and frightens Jesus' friends. Death comes to devour Jesus' friends. He is so full of emotions at Lazarus' death that his body shakes. Tears well up in his eyes.

My dear friends, don't feel embarrassed at tears! So often someone mentions that they don't even want to come to church because every time they come, they cry. What better place to cry? What better place to have emotions overtake you so that your whole body shakes? It is here, in the sanctuary, staring at the altar and the cross, that we too can say about our loved one who has died, "See how He loved her! See how He loved him!"

The mourners present ask a pointed question that we too want to ask at the death of a loved one.

37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus had just recently healed a man born blind (John 9). Couldn't he have kept this man from dying? What is questioned? Either Jesus' love or his power. And those questions come to our mind as well. I think of a man early in my ministry whose son died in infancy. I read the account of the raising of the young man from Nain at the funeral. Later the father asked, "Why did Jesus raise that widow's son and not mine?" Why didn't Jesus act?

The answer lies in mystery. It is only by faith that we know that Jesus is a man of purpose.

When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he did not immediately go to his aid.

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days,7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

Jesus had a purpose in Lazarus' death... first of all a purpose for his friends. Jesus' own death was coming soon, perhaps just a month away. Jesus allowed Lazarus to die so that he might be more clearly seen by his followers as the Son of God.

Isn't that true of us? Would we be here if death was not a fact of life for each of us? Death is the ultimate reminder that we are not masters of our own fate. The sudden death of a friend or co-worker, the departure of a beloved Christian mentor, reminds us that we need more than our strength, we need God's strength. It is in this pain of sorrow that God seeks to draw us to himself, where finally we say, "We don't have the answers. Only you do."

And death has a purpose for his enemies as well. I discovered that this is the section in John's gospel where the terminology shifts. Prior to this, Jesus primarily used the term "Son of Man" to describe himself. But now he shifts to "Son of God." Jesus is about to use the death and resurrection of Lazarus as a powerful testimony to his enemies that they cannot ignore him. In the next chapter of John's gospel we read:

9 Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11 for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

It is in the face of death that Jesus' glory is displayed in the courageous faith of his followers. When those who don't believe see the hope that we have in Christ Jesus even in the face of death, the Son of God is glorified even among his enemies.

I saw that clearly in the death of my sister-in-law. She died about this time of year when her youngest son was working on his confirmation confession of faith for the worship folder, like we do. Before she died, she had shared with her son her confidence that Jesus was her Savior and that she would rise from the dead. What a powerful testimony it was to hear the pastor in his sermon read Laurie's own words. I will never understand all of God's purpose in taking Laurie from us so suddenly, but I certainly thank God for the testimony that she was allowed to give.

That day outside of Jerusalem, Jesus, a man of sorrows, also revealed himself as a man of power.

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

What comfort this power gives us for time and for eternity!

For time? This is the purpose of the lesson from Ezekiel 37. When the Israelites had no hope God gave them a vision of a vast resurrection. If Jesus can raise the dead, then there is nothing that he cannot do. Your situation, my situation, they are never hopeless. We have a God who loves us who died for us and rose again. And if he shows that love by his death and his power by the resurrection then you and I are never without hope. Some of you here right now are just a valley of dry bones. Your hope is gone. More than once you've contemplated suicide as the solution.

But Jesus' display of power outside of Lazarus' tomb can help us see that it is never hopeless. The God who shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" can also shout, "Hope, come back to life!" He can make one dry bone of hopelessness connect to another dry bone of hopelessness. Our hope revives when we focus on the God who can raise the dead. There is nothing that he cannot do.

And that hope lives even in the face of death itself. Just as surely as Lazarus' body came forth from the tomb, our bodies will come forth. Glorified bodies (Philippians 3:21). Never to die again (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). Most wonderfully, free from the power of sin and corruption.

Yes, Jesus is a man for sorrows. He can sympathize with us in our weakness. He understands your grief your anger. He is like us in every way!

But he is also a man for sorrow because he has the solution.

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

I am the resurrection. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. Physically we will die, but we live. We are with Christ after we die.

I am the life. He who believes in me will never die. The second death, the lake of burning fire that is depicted in the visions of Revelation... This second death has no power over us. We will not experience the true death of hell. In reality, our bodies are dead, but we are not. In Christ we shall never die. We have already crossed over from death to life (John 5:24-25).

Brothers and sisters, the question for us is the same question that Martha faced. Do you believe this? Do you believe this now perhaps when it is not a time of sorrow? Do you believe it on those days when you stand before the coffin of someone you love? Now, now, is the time to claim the truth that we know our God's love by looking at our Savior. Jesus is a man of emotions whose love for you is unchanging. His love does not change even as you face death and the death of a loved one. Jesus is a man of purpose who is using even the sorrow that you experience to draw you closer to himself that the Son of God might be glorified in your life even to those who are his enemies. Do you believe that he is a man of power? That he can help you now and forever? If he can't help us at the death of a loved one... if he can't help us as we face our own death, what good is he? Praise God he is familiar with our sorrows so that he might be a man for our time of sorrow.

For some of you, this has been a difficult message to hear. You are grieving for a loved one. A loved one is dying. You have been a man or woman of sorrows as you have gone through a dark and difficult time in your life. Perhaps, like Jesus, tears have welled up in your eyes. If that is

true of you, if you are especially hurting right now, I invite you to stand so that we could pray for you.

It is my privilege to tell you that Jesus loves you and your family. But not only Jesus loves you. Your fellow Christians love you as well. If there is someone standing near you, could you stand and place your hand on their shoulder to assure them that they are not facing this sorrow alone. Jesus, the man of sorrows, is here with them, and so are we. We are here to bear each other's burdens in prayer. Let's pray...

Finally, let's all stand and confess our faith in God's unchanging love and the resurrection, using the words of Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.

But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian Church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers.

On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

Amen means "This is most certainly true." It is with this "amen" that we, who are people of sorrow, can close this service with rejoicing. The Man of Sorrows has come. He will come again in glory to raise the dead. Amen.

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My Next Steps

- **Read Ezekiel 37:1-14** in times of sorrow when "our hope is gone."
- **Read John 11:1-45** in times of sorrow when facing death.
- **Read Revelation 7:9-17** in times of sorrow to see the life that awaits us.