Temiskaming Deanery
Morning Prayer
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2020
Joan Morris, Lay Incumbent of Trillium Parish

Numbers 22:36 – 23:12; Psalms 126, 127, 128; John 11:1-44 (BCP)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to You, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

In our OT reading this morning we meet Balak, the King of Moab, who is extremely distressed to have the very large nation of Israel camped at his doorstep. He sends for the Midianite seer, Balaam, to curse these people. I encourage you to look up Numbers 22-25 to learn more about Balaam. There’s a humourous twist in this story!

Our passage today begins with Balak and Balaam meeting on the northern border of Moab. Balaam tells the king that he will speak only the words which God puts in his mouth. After making sacrifices on 7 altars, Balaam goes off to speak with God. Instead of the curse which Balak is expecting, Balaam speaks the words God has given him in the form of a blessing on Israel: “How can I curse whom God has not cursed? … Here is a people living alone, and not reckoning itself among the nations! Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the dust-cloud of Israel?”

Despite Balak’s anger, Balaam can only say the words which God puts into his mouth. Balak will try 3 more times to have Balaam curse Israel, but each time Balaam only blesses the great nation. God has revealed to Balaam the special status which Israel holds with God. Like Balaam, we too must speak and do only God’s will, regardless of any pressure to do otherwise.

Moving ahead in time about 1500 years, we find Jesus north of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Jordan. The disciples have been with Jesus for about 3 years now. They have witnessed many healings and miracles. But even now, they don’t fully understand who Jesus is. When Jesus receives word that His friend is ill, He knows Lazarus will be dead by the time He arrives. We must remember – Jesus knows all things!

How often does Jesus say something, only to be misunderstood? In today’s passage, Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep. The disciples can’t understand why Jesus would risk His life by returning to Judea if Lazarus is only asleep. But “falling asleep” also has a deeper and more serious meaning. Jesus explains that Lazarus is indeed dead.

Jesus knew perfectly well that to go to Bethany and raise Lazarus from death was to take a step which would end in the cross. Jesus knew the cost of helping and He was well prepared to pay it.

Jesus will use Lazarus’ illness as an occasion for revelation: “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” This is another
teaching moment for the disciples so that they may come even more firmly to faith. Lazarus’ illness does not ultimately end in his death; but ironically Lazarus rising to life again will lead to Jesus’ death on the cross.

Jesus has His own timetable. Not even the love He has for this family will alter the unfolding of events as they have been set out. In spite of the danger of returning to this area of Judea, there is still work to be done in order to fulfill the scriptures’ prophecies. Jesus waits 2 days before heading to Lazarus’ home.

When Martha meets Jesus on the road, her words to Jesus are not so much a complaint, but rather her expression of regret, and her faith in Jesus as a healer. “If You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give You whatever You ask of Him.” Martha knows that God will listen to Jesus’ prayers.

Martha and Mary, are well aware of Jesus’ teachings about the resurrection, and when Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again, she affirms her belief that he will rise again on the last day. When Jesus declares Himself to be “the Resurrection and the Life,” He is declaring the promise of resurrection and life is not some distant event, but is available here and now in the person of Jesus Himself.

When Jesus asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” He asks her to believe both that He is the Resurrection and the Life and that as such, He defeats the power of death. By identifying Himself as the Resurrection and the Life, Jesus is declaring His unity with the Father; that He shares fully in the power of God; that Jesus and God are one. Martha believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who has been promised.

She hurries back to tell Mary that Jesus has come. Mary arrives at the tomb with many mourners. When Mary sees Jesus, her reaction is the same as Martha’s. Why hadn’t Jesus come sooner? When Jesus sees Mary and the crowd weeping – or more accurately, wailing, He is deeply moved. Jesus is greatly disturbed, even to tears, when He sees the tomb. Are His tears an acknowledgement of the pain that death causes in human life? Jesus shows us a God whose heart is wrung with anguish when His people suffer anguish. Or does He perhaps see what is lying ahead for Himself in the not so distant future?

When Jesus tells the people to take the stone away from the tomb, Martha protests because the stench from the decomposition would have been overwhelming. Even her exemplary confession of faith could not prepare her for the fullness of Jesus’ identity and gifts. Jesus says to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God?”

Jesus takes time to pray, to thank His Father. He raises His eyes upward, toward God, so that God’s glory will be seen in the miracle. Jesus prays so that those gathered at the tomb may recognize what Jesus knows: that He does nothing on His own, that everything He does is God’s action in and through Him. It is God who answers our prayers.

Thanksgiving and praise to our Father in heaven, is the first thing we do when we call upon God for help. We offer thanks to God, because we know that He hears us and that He loves us.
Jesus’ prayer is a powerful acknowledgement of His relationship with God to which He repeatedly appeals throughout His ministry. Jesus lives in constant communion with God, and in this prayer, He models the confidence in God which He commands His disciples to follow. Everything that Jesus says and does has been given to Him by God. God has given Jesus power over life and death, the power to raise the dead.

After thanking and praising God, Jesus calls to Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Lazarus has long since crossed over the boundary into death. Lazarus comes out of the tomb, still bound in his grave clothes, his rising totally dependent on the voice of Jesus to achieve his freedom from death. Lazarus steps from the darkness of his tomb into the light of Jesus’ new day, into a new life. Jesus calls each one of us to step into His light, into a new life with Him.

The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead illustrates the truths that Jesus previously declared to Martha, “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.” The magnitude of this claim cannot be overstated, because it announces that God’s power over life and death is now shared with Jesus.

It is these truths, not the miracle itself, that have lasting significance for the life of faith. Jesus brought into life the certainty that death is not the end. This is a promise of what a relationship with Jesus offers to those who embrace it. More than just words of hope, these words offer a vision of the irrevocable promise of life in the full presence of God during life and after death here on earth.

Through Jesus, we know that we journey into a new life. Belief in Jesus means accepting everything He has said as absolute truth, and to stake our lives upon that in perfect trust. Unless we believe in Jesus and His word, the transformed life He offers is rendered void.

We can be absolutely certain of God’s love; that He is, above all, a redeeming God. Our fear of death vanishes, because with death we go to be with our Creator, the lover of our souls. When we accept Christ’s way as our way, life becomes such a wondrous thing that we can’t conceive of it ending. When we believe in Jesus, when we accept what He says about God and about life, and we stake everything on these beliefs, in truth we are resurrected – freed from fear, freed from frustration, and freed from the futility of a Christless life. In Jesus, there is transition to a higher life.

God’s relationship with the world has now changed, through Jesus. The power of death to separate people from God is reduced to nothing by the presence of the power of God in Jesus. Because God loves the world, and each of us who dwell in it, God gives Jesus to the world for its salvation, so that the world might come to know fully God’s love for it and live grounded in that love.

Faith is belief in the truth of Jesus’ relationship with God and the change that relationship means for the lives of those who believe. Faith creates communion with Jesus, and through Jesus, believers receive the gift of life. Praise be to God!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.