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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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For Everything There is a Time...
John 11:30-45

On the way to school one day last week, Maddie overheard the NPR's Rachel Martin talking about a diary. So Maddie asked, "What's a diary? Does it have something to do with... death?" I was confused for a minute, and then I realized how the word sounded. The day after Halloween, with her imagination in hyper-drive, it's a reasonable conclusion! I explained that no – a diary is a book that someone writes in every day to keep track of things that happen. Diary as in daily, a daily practice to remember and process everyday life. As I thought about it, though, I realized that she's not wrong. Death is an inevitable part of life. Rodger Nishioka reminds us that the Christian experience is a cycle of continually living-dying-and rising to new life.

It is the way of nature, too. As the weather finally turned cooler this week, we began the cycle of dormancy and death that comes with fall and the cold of winter each year, a necessary phase for plants to store energy before sending forth new growth in the spring. A necessary time for the earth to rest, for organic matter to decompose and infuse new minerals into the soil. In her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Barbara Kingsolver writes of covering her cleared out garden with old newspapers in the fall to prevent weeds from taking over during the fallow months, and to enrich the soil. What catharsis to see the dreadful headlines from the past year melt into the earth, to become food for flowers in the spring.

Our church is in a time of transition. It has been one year exactly since Shannon retired, with accolades and well wishes and a whole flurry of Kris Kristofferson quotes. We could not know then what we know now, all that the past year held. It has been for us, in many ways, a season of loss. And, I believe it has also been a time of renewal. There was no way to anticipate the chaos and crisis of the wider world – from the shooting at Parkland High School in Florida to the Kroger and the Tree of Life tragedies more recently. A new Supreme Court justice after a trainwreck of a confirmation hearing. The separation of families at our southern border, and the ongoing indefinite detention or fostering of babies and children younger than my own.

A lot happened in our little community, too. We lost beloved church members, some unexpectedly, some as the inevitable result of illness or old age, and it hurts. Jeanne Plaxco died with countless bags of fiberfill still stashed away, a sign of all the stuffed animals she had left to create with her friends in the White Cross, sweet toys for the new babies of our congregation and the kids of the Presbyterian Home for Children and First Light. Sandra Storm left a void as big as her personality in the mission and ministry of our church, a Sandra-shaped hole in the session, sacred arts gallery, and in the life of the congregation.

The deaths of Drew Patton and Evelyn Elliott are losses we carry deep in the soul of our church family, as we grieve what might have been with these two good saints gone far too soon from among us.

It's almost too much to bear.

But this is why we gather, week after week, to remember and reclaim God's promises anew. To hold each other up when we lose the strength to stand, to hear the music soar up to the rafters even when words fail under the weight of our pain. We gather to give thanks to God for the gift of grace: grace to heal our broken hearts, peace to heal our broken world. We gather to be surrounded by each other - friends who will help us face the powers of death and destruction, because we follow the one who by the power of his love undid those powers completely.

Lately, I keep coming back to this story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Not just because the miracle of resurrection is so incredible and hard to comprehend, though that's part of it. Today, I think it's because this one story encompasses the full range of human emotion - it has all the feels as the kids are saying these days. It begins with desperation. "Lord, the one whom you love is sick - come quickly." Desperation I feel when I hear the news some days.

Then, a feeling with which I'm all too familiar - procrastination. Jesus doesn't go to Bethany right away. He waits four days before visiting! By that time, Mary and Martha are sad, because their brother has died, and they are angry, because if Jesus had just come when they called, this wouldn't have happened. He could've saved Lazarus. Some people say this delay was intentional, so that God could be glorified by the miracle of the resurrection. But I don't want to buy that. That's a terrible trick to play on your friends.

So Mary and Martha are deep in grief by the time Jesus finally gets there, saying, Lord, if you had come, our brother would not have died. I love this exchange. I love it because it shows us that God can handle our anger. Jesus doesn't tell the sisters to behave themselves, he doesn't tell them that their faith is weak; he doesn't scold or correct them. He is present to them. He hears and reassures them, saying he is the resurrection and the life. That we who believe in him, even though we die, shall live.

What comes next is truly powerful. Because at the tomb of his friend, Jesus weeps, too. The one who is the resurrection and the life weeps at the power of death in our world.

There is one time when I can remember ever seeing my father cry. It was when I was young, just a little older than Maddie. One of his law partners, a labor lawyer and friend he ran with named John Cassibry died from cancer at the age of 38. My dad had been at the funeral and came home, and pulled his little black Peugeot into the garage. I ran out to meet him and was confused to find him wiping his eyes. It surprised me. I remember feeling unmoored. My dad was the one who always comforted me. He was not the one who cried.

Jesus stood at the tomb of his friend and he wept.

The text is a little unclear about why Jesus was crying. Commentators have parsed the language many different ways to try to make sense of it. There's an element of anger, of anguish in the words John uses – the literal translation is that his insides are twisted. I've felt that way before, maybe you have, too, upon hearing news you didn't want to hear, or facing a loss that seems insurmountable.

As a parent, I have thought back on that moment of my dad in the garage, wiping his eyes after burying his friend. There have been moments where I've paused to compose myself, staying outside for a minute before coming in to be with my family. Not because it's not okay to cry – of course it is – but to process what I'm feeling, and why, so I can shift from being a pastor, to being a mom, or a partner.

The people were amazed at Jesus's tears – see how he loved him, they said.

This moment of gut-wrenching grief as Jesus confronts the devastating power of death shows us that faith does not inoculate us against tragedy and loss. But it does give us a community that will prop us up, and hands to hold on to. It does remind us that death is not the final word. God's work continues.

In this season of transition, seeds of change have begun to take root. We have new team leaders bringing new energy and ideas to our work. We've begun to welcome our neighbors in new ways, with a whole host of housed and homeless people gathering at the turquoise table throughout the week. We've heard people's dreams for our city – dreams for peace and equality, an end to violence and good jobs for all. And next month, we will begin to live out our dream of opening our church as a neighborhood resource, practicing radical hospitality by opening the chapel for prayer and spiritual counsel each Wednesday. The work of the PNC continues, as they narrow the field to find the pastor and leader our church needs for years to come.

Wherever you find yourself in this transition time, know that it is okay. Trust that God is at work in you, and in this place. During communion, you'll have a chance to pray at a few prayer stations here at the front of the sanctuary. We invite you to light candles to remember those who have died. To reflect on and give thanks for someone whose image you try to emulate in the world. To use the sand to ask for the grace to let go of anger you carry, to find forgiveness. In this way, we will walk together towards healing and wholeness as a community of faith. Thanks be to God.