

This is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is almost as old as the church—in the early years when the church was being persecuted by the Romans we would have a three or four year membership process. In the final year, Lent was the final forty days, not including Sundays. It was a period of increased: prayer, fasting, study of scripture and acts of service. Then they would be baptized the night before Easter.

For us Lent is also a time of increased concentration and this year the Daniel Plan will guide us. The Daniel Plan helps us to see how God created all of us and God desires abundant life in all of us—mind, body and spirit. Mind, body, spirit are three separate areas, but they are connected. We are God’s wonderfully made interconnected masterpieces. We are stewards of our minds, bodies and spirits and this Lent we will see how faith, food, fitness, focus and friends are all part of the abundant life God wants for us. Now is the time to get on board—to learn insights, develop skills and establish habits for a lifetime of health.

Each Sunday I will preach on the abundant life area for the week—faith, food, fitness, focus and friends—the small groups will watch a video and discuss it and we will read the corresponding chapter in the Daniel Plan book.

We start with Faith. Clearly there is no quick fixes that get us healthy overnight but the Daniel Plan is built with love as the motivation, not shame or our own willpower. Experiencing God’s unconditional love, learning to love whom God made us to be, and learning to give and receive love are key. With God, with love, we are far more successful at making positive change and staying consistent.

If you aren’t in a small group yet, you can still join, if you don’t have a book and small group guide, we have a few more left and we can order more!

The opening verses from today’s reading sets the scene, “Lord he whom you love is sick.” Martha and Mary are experiencing the illness

of their brother. This is an experience that many of us have lived. We’ve been in the ICU, sat by the hospice bed or held a child with a 103 fever at 2am. We know, “Lord the one whom you love is sick.” But Jesus delays. If I had a choice I would rewrite this to say Jesus headed out right away. But Jesus delays, Lazarus is dead four days when he arrives and Martha says, “If you would have been here my brother wouldn’t have died.” But she doesn’t write Jesus off. Martha tells Jesus, “Even now I know, whatever you ask God will grant.”

It’s easy to view the main point of the story as the ending, the raising of Lazarus, that’s even what we name the story despite being only the last two verses. Maybe the title should be, “The Belief of Martha.” In the Gospel of Luke, Martha is the sister that makes the lesser choice; she is busy attending to details when Jesus visits, while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet. In today’s story both sisters say, “Lord if you would have been here our brother wouldn’t have died.” But Martha is the one that says, “I know that whatever you ask, God will grant.” While Mary weeps. Two sisters and two very different response to grief. Martha is a bit more collected and conversational. Mary is weeping. But Jesus meets them both in the midst of their grief. With Martha, Jesus offers the promise, “I am the reassertion and the life.” With Mary, Jesus weeps.

Jesus meets them in the midst of their loss and grief. Jesus’ promise is given in the middle; in the midst of Lazarus stone cold dead in the tomb. And that is where we need the promise. The promise matters most when everything in our experience calls into question the possibility of hope. What calls us forward in the face of things we can’t explain? Martha says, “Lord if you would have been here our brother wouldn’t have died.” Martha doesn’t get answers. We often can’t explain the situation but we have to live through it, Jesus sits with us and points us toward another truth. With the confidence that God’s love is real and active we have a promise that calls us forward.

My family has become good friends with my 8th grade English teacher’s daughter and son-in-law and so we have stayed connected

with, my teacher, Steve and his wife Suzy. A few months ago, Suzy was diagnosed with a rare form of aggressive brain cancer. She has been doing amazingly well. Last Wednesday Steve posted this to the Caring Bridge site.

Valentines and Ashes. Giddy love and humble prayer on the same day. Thrive and survive. Good news-- bad news. Living in a family that knows and has known so much joy and fun now challenged by the harsh realities of hospitals, surgeries, and scans. Life is a paradox.

New scans reveal that a concerning spot has grown. The bad news-- it is there. The good news—this typically aggressive cancer is moving slowly. We discuss options. No surgery for now. Holistic treatment for 30 more days...some chemo after that. Our doctor listens, works with us, respects our efforts, does not judge.

Together we choose hope. After the late afternoon appointment, we choose pizza. Our Twin Cities' family gathers to eat, talk and find ways to laugh.

Last Sunday we went to watch the youth choir's annual musical, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. As audience, we know the ending. Joseph does not. He has paradox. Good does not always lead to reward. More like slavery and prison. He has every right to bitterness. But he chooses life....keeps moving....stays faithful....saves God's people. His God-given dreams come true but not without nightmares along the way.

Today was a good day. Tomorrow looks promising, too. We will continue to choose life. Join us.

Resurrection and life is the two-fold promise that comes in the middle of today's story and this where Jesus gives it to us now, in the midst of our lives. The sign, raising Lazarus, is at the end, could be misinterpreted as, "Oh great, Jesus can raise people from the dead," but this sign is more than that! Martha says, "Yes, I believe in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus says, "No, the life I have is right here right now." The life Jesus gives is beyond Lazarus coming out of the tomb. The promise is, "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly."

What Jesus does for Lazarus, Jesus promises to do for all. Lazarus' death is real; death is real. The promise is that death is not final. What Jesus does in all our lives is call us from death to life. Jesus calls us to faith and life and love. To live abundantly with body, mind and spirit interconnected...to celebrate and experience joy!

No matter whether the change needed in our lives is in the area of faith, food, fitness, focus and friends Jesus is there in love working with us. God's abundance calls us out of the tomb of death and God calls us to abundant life here and now. Jesus' love surrounds us and fills us and makes change possible in our lives. The power of Jesus' love calls to us, "Come out!" Death does not have the final word. This grace upon grace is the life that Jesus provides. Amen.