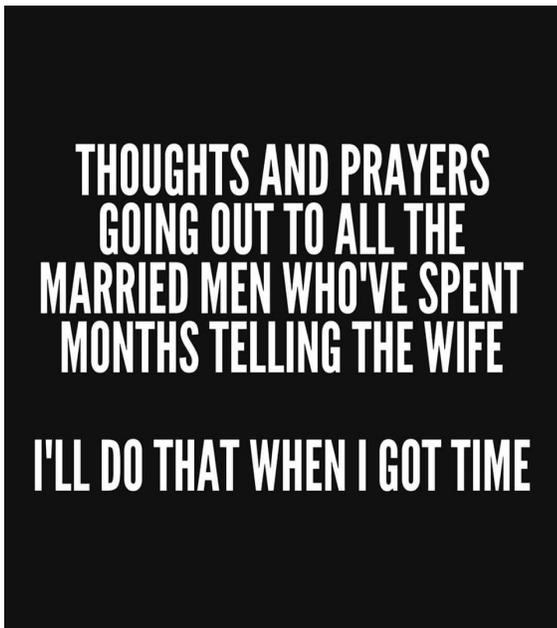




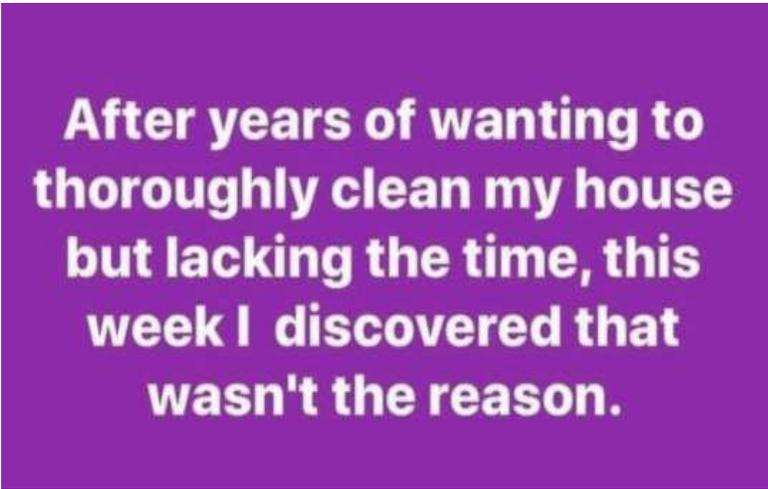
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
March 29, 2020

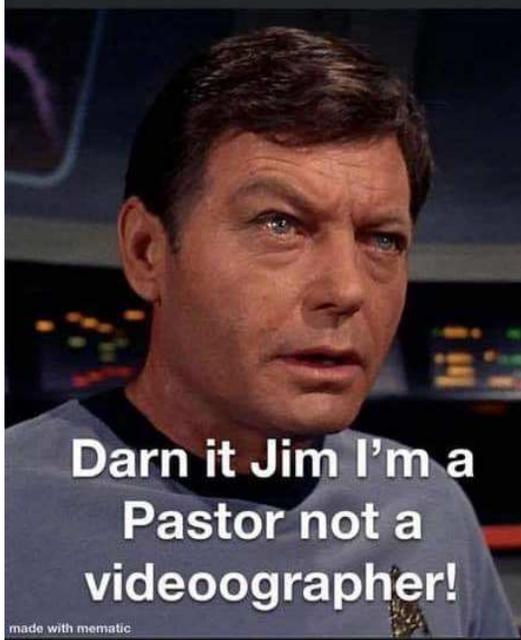
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday's round of memes got a favorable response – from Beth, if not my kids – so, here we go again: more funny one-liners from around the internet to begin your Sunday sermon.



my new social distancing outfit just arrived from amazon.





I especially relate to this one on the left – I’m a priest not a videographer, and if it weren’t for Lewis and Emily, none of this technology would be working for us right now, so a big thank you to both of them. They’re both doing all their school work online, trying to stay connected with friends, and still making time to work on these videos for us.

This fifth Sunday in Lent brings us the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, arguably the most dramatic miracle in all of Scripture. On the surface it may seem to be the kind of miracle story that we all might want to live through – a dead person comes back to life – but I believe that a deeper reading shows it to be not so much a tale of God’s power but, rather, a story about God’s grace in the midst of struggle and suffering.

Consider the following aspects of what John tells us: Jesus loses one of his closest friends to death, at just the moment in his life and ministry when he most needs friends who will stick by him. Mary and Martha experience profound grief and loss as they go through a terminal illness with their brother and ultimately lose him to death. This story is replete with all the struggles that we are presently facing in our own lives: fear, loss, anxiety, disease, death, and grief.

And here is what I find to be especially difficult about this story: Lazarus will ultimately have to die again. Just think about it for a moment: Lazarus isn’t around, 2,000 years later, is he? At some point – a month, a year, 40 years – after this miracle took place, Lazarus had to go through terminal illness again and go through death again. We often call this the “resurrection” of Lazarus, but technically it wasn’t a resurrection, it was a resuscitation.

In the Bible and Christian spirituality, resurrection is what Jesus experienced on Easter morning and it is what we will all experience one day when we enter the life of the world to come. Resurrection is when our mortal bodies are transformed into immortal bodies and we are freed from sickness and death forever.

Lazarus was not resurrected into eternal life, he was brought back into this natural life. I won’t presume to know what that was like for him and his family. Certainly, there must have been great joy at the reunion of their life together. And yet, I wonder, how did the neighbors treat Lazarus in the years that followed? How did

Lazarus and his sisters feel knowing that all the grief they had experienced would have to be experienced all over again someday?

As much as Lazarus' extended life may have been a blessing to him, it was also, I think, his cross to bear for the remainder of his life. God's gift to him also came with a tremendous responsibility. Jesus was speaking quite plainly at the start of the story when he said that this illness was "for God's glory."

That's why I said earlier that this may not actually be the kind of miracle story that we all would want to live through. Rather, I believe that it is a story about God's grace in the midst of struggle and suffering.

The one constant through the story is that God is aware of our suffering, and shares with us in that suffering, through Jesus Christ's life as God in the flesh. Jesus knows that Lazarus is sick, and he cares about that. Jesus hears Mary's doubts and fears, and he seeks to bring her peace. Jesus weeps with those who weep. And Jesus is right there beside Lazarus when his whole world is rocked to its foundations and he returns to life – for all the good and all the struggle that will mean for Lazarus in the days and years to come.

And so it is with us, in the midst of plague and emergency, in the midst of fear and unemployment, in the midst of stock market crashes and illness. God is with us through Jesus Christ. He cares about what we are experiencing, he hears and responds to our doubts and questions, and perhaps most importantly of all: he weeps when we weep. Our creator has not left us alone, he has entered into our suffering with us so that he might redeem and save us – so that he might save us, not from our suffering, but through our suffering.

Last week the Franciscan theologian and spiritual director Richard Rohr offered this thought about our present crisis in one of his daily emails: Rohr said, "for God to reach us, we have to allow suffering to wound us." What he meant is that we have to understand that God will not always save us from suffering, sometimes God will save us through our suffering. God reached deep into the souls of Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and their whole community when – instead of saving Lazarus from illness and death – God instead walked through illness and death with Lazarus, and brought about a new life on the other side of that suffering.

Rohr is encouraging us to do what we saw Mary and Jesus doing in today's story: to weep, to grieve, and to allow ourselves to experience suffering instead of trying to run from it, hide from it, or self-medicate it away through food, or alcohol, or other addictive behaviors. Now is not a time for us to pretend that our feelings aren't real – if we pretend our feelings aren't real then God can't really help us. It is only when we weep and Jesus weeps with us that the story can begin to move forward to its glorious and joyful conclusion.

My prayer for myself, and for each of you, this fifth Sunday in Lent is this: may we accept the suffering which is being forced upon us and, in doing so, may we find new depths of love and communion with our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.