

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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September 6, 2020

Deliver Us from Evil: The God Who Weeps

John 11:1-44 (ESV)

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone

who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Here we are this morning, six months into this troublesome, sometimes annoying and sometimes frightening evil we call COVID-19. “*When will it end?*” is our continual frame of mind. We tell jokes about the pandemic, trying to break the weight of anxiety, boredom, and weariness, so that we can cope. (I wish I knew a good one right now.) And we gather—in the sanctuary, or online—to call on the Lord for his help. We surely need it! And he has been faithful to answer our prayers. I don’t know what your personal numbers are up to, but for me, I can now count five friends who have come down with COVID;

three are recovering fairly well, and two are still fighting it. But I praise God that, to my knowledge, no one in our congregation has been diagnosed with the disease, for which we are very grateful.

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

“*Deliver us from evil*” is the name of our current series, and it’s a really strong-sounding, totally righteous kind of expression of piety. “*Deliver us from evil*”– I mean, it’s straight from the words of the “Lord’s Prayer,” so it has to be pretty spiritual, right? There has to be some spiritual power behind those words, right? It just sounds so . . . *holy*. And maybe therein lies the problem. For there is definitely a problem.

Now it is certainly true that these words come from the prayer that the Lord gave to his disciples as a model from which they could learn how to pray. In fact, those words, “*deliver us from evil*,” are crucial to Jesus’ prayer—they are critically important to understand for anyone who desires to follow Jesus. So I don’t want to suggest that this expression, “*deliver us from evil*,” is somehow unworthy, or isn’t genuine enough, or is something that only offers vague metaphorical theology for us to ponder for its significance to our lives. Not at all.

No, those words, “*deliver us from evil*,” are exceedingly important and more relevant than we might imagine. They express the heart cry of all those who are born of the Spirit—even all those who are not yet born again, but who are still open to hear his voice.

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The problem is not that those words are insignificant, nor that they are inappropriate, nor that they are somehow too far above us (in the sense of being too fancy for ordinary folks). No, the problem is something different. The problem is that until we learn how to turn them into a genuine lament, those words feel like a recitation, something we’ve memorized and can regurgitate without thinking.* They aren’t connected to the ache in our soul, the ripping feeling in our heart when we encounter great pain—particularly when we suffer the loss of someone we love deeply.

It’s a pretty easy bet that all of you have gone through a time of grieving. When someone close to you dies, what springs to our lips most naturally is not a holy recitation of a sacred prayer. What pours out of our mouth is an angry and anguished cry, where there aren’t any words that adequately carry the pain of our emotions. So we scream or bellow or curse or mumble incoherently. Or we simply weep in silent, sobbing, grief.

[Slide 4] *The setting*

That's where we find ourselves in our text for this morning, in the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus, two sisters and their brother, who were particular favorites of Jesus. They were people he really loved, not just in general, like he loved the crowds who thronged about him when they came to seek healing. Martha and Mary and Lazarus were his friends. Special friends. They were friends that Jesus would seek out when he came near, three siblings whom Jesus liked. He was particularly fond of these three; his smile came easily when he saw them, when he was with them.

For their part, Martha and Mary and Lazarus were devoted to Jesus. They had thrown their lot in with him, for better or for worse. His love for them had showed them what God was like. His miracles had demonstrated the power of God and his word had opened their hearts so that they were convinced: Jesus was undoubtedly the Messiah, the one whom God had sent to deliver his people from their oppressors, to deliver them from their sins, to deliver them from evil.

And that's why Martha and Mary were so devastated by the events that transpired that are recorded for us in John chapter 11.

Let's walk through the account from the start.

[Slide 5] *Lazarus*

We are introduced at first to Lazarus. This is the first time in the gospel accounts that we meet this man, though his sisters are known to us from Luke's gospel, and from a later episode in John's gospel which he references in verse two. We know four things about Lazarus from this text: (1) He lives in Bethany, a small village about two miles from Jerusalem. (2) He is the brother of Mary and Martha. (3) He is sick—sick enough that his sisters have sent word to Jesus asking him to come to them, in order to heal their brother. (4) Jesus loved him.

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This last fact is something that John emphasizes right at the start. First, the sisters remind Jesus about it: they appeal to him on the basis of what they have experienced over their time of knowing him. "*He whom you love is ill.*" Why would they do that? Certainly part of the reason is that Jesus had made it clear to them on more than one occasion that he loved them. They had never heard him say anything untrue, so they believed him. And they counted on his compassion, which they had seen multiple times when he had healed the sick, when he ate with sinners and forgave them. He had demonstrated his love to them personally over and over. So they appealed to his love, to his compassion, knowing that they could count on him.

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Then John reinforces the point in verse five lest we miss it by reading too quickly. *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*. Everything that follows in the story must be read in the light of that statement.

When you hear someone say, “*God loves you*,” or you read those words in the Bible, do you read the events of your life in the light of those words? Or do you see your life experience as something that conflicts with the statement that “*God loves you*.” That’s what happened to Martha and Mary—and, I expect, to Lazarus.

Jesus had enabled them to understand God’s love. They felt it from him when he was with them. They heard it in his voice when he taught them. They saw it in every miracle, every touch given to a leper or an outcast, every embrace of a sinner, every action he took. They believed in his love, because they had experienced it.

But then Lazarus fell ill—and it wasn’t something small, a headache that goes away after some rest, or a cold, or a stomachache. It was serious, and it got worse. So they turned to the only one they knew who could help, and determined to trust him, to trust his love. Jesus had said that he loved them; he had shown them that he loved them; and he had shown them that his love meant healing for sick people flowed out from him. So they sent word to him: “*Jesus, please come quickly; Lazarus, the one whom you love (remember?) is ill.*”

Then they waited for God to show up.

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But while they waited, Lazarus got worse. They reassured each other: Jesus would come. He would heal their brother. One day passed. Then another. Then Lazarus died. His sisters were shattered. Jesus had not responded to their plea for his help. *I thought he loved us . . .*

Verses 13-15 let us know that Jesus was aware that Lazarus was dying when he got the message asking for help, and that he had died by the time Jesus finally decided to return to Judea to see Lazarus and his sisters.

I think that if Martha and Mary had known what was going on at the time, how Jesus responded to their request, they would have been more than shattered, they would have been furious. Jesus hears the message, assures his disciples that this will not end in death for Lazarus—and *purposely delays his response . . .* for two more days. Because he knows that there is something greater in view here; God has a far more glorious plan that is being worked out—for Lazarus, for Martha, for Mary, for Jesus, for the kingdom of God. And the only way for that plan to

happen, for the glory to be revealed, for the ultimate good to come, was for Jesus to wait two more days to respond, and for Lazarus to die.

We all tend to read life through the wrong lenses. We hear the words, “*God loves you,*” and we ask, “*Well, then, why did such-and-such happen? Why didn’t God do something? Why didn’t he show up when I asked him to heal my husband, our son, my mother?*” Our disappointment and our grief blind us, and we can’t see beyond our pain to the greater something that God is doing, the something that only shows up after we go through the grief, go through the pain, go through the dying.

[Slide 9] *Martha’s first response*

Martha’s response in verses 21-22 is pretty typical of all of us. It’s what I hear time and time again, when I’ve listened to the anguished pleas of people who are grieving, pleas that are disguised as hope and faith. First comes the accusation: “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. It’s your fault, Jesus! I sent for you. I sent a message to you. I told you he was sick. You didn’t come.*” If you’re familiar with the so-called “stages of grief” (though they’re not really stages so much as simply different phases or aspects of grieving), this is anger. It’s normal. And notice this, Jesus isn’t upset by her accusation. He knows that it doesn’t represent who she is, just how she feels right now.

He also knows that her anger is mixed with a little bit of faith. But there’s still too much of some other aspects of grief that are alive in her heart: she’s in full “denial,” with some “bargaining” thrown in, to boot. There is something twisted by her grief, underneath her accusation and her protestation of faith. When Martha says to Jesus, “*I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you,*” she is trying to force Jesus to act. She is bargaining with him, offering her show of faith as a chip to trade for Jesus’ miracle-working power. Her prayer is basically this: “*Jesus, please make it so this didn’t happen. Please change the past so my brother isn’t dead right now.*” Martha wants to go back to the time before Lazarus died, to the time when Jesus could have come, so that the clock gets rolled back, the time when Jesus shows up in response to her message, lays his hands on Lazarus, and Lazarus rises up, completely healed. That’s what she wants. That’s what she is bargaining for with Jesus.

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But God doesn’t undo the past. He doesn’t change the past—even when what happens results in pain, sorrow, and death; even when we want him to change the past so desperately that we are willing to trade anything to make it so that what is

real isn't real any more. That's what we want. That's what we pray for—lots of times. And God never says, “yes,” to that prayer.

[Slide 11] *Jesus' response: “Look to my promise.”*

Instead, he invites us to hold onto his promise of a greater answer—overcoming through resurrection; holding out for the next life rather than holding onto this life. Jesus reminds Martha of a truth that will transcend both her pain and Lazarus' death, a truth that requires her to believe for something that she has never seen and could not fully imagine, but which will change everything for her: “*Your brother will rise again.*”

[Slide 12] *Martha's second response*

Martha hears that promise and it nearly breaks her already shattered heart. Her second response is a mixture of faith and disappointment. She wanted a miracle; she wanted the clock turned back. And her heart sinks when she realizes that Jesus isn't going to change the past.

Martha can repeat the doctrine she was taught: “*I believe he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. I will give my affirmation of the doctrinal truth of the final resurrection.*” She believes in a resurrection that happens “someday.” But that's not the answer she wants. What she wants is her brother back alive *now*. She wants her brother to be not dead, alive today, not alive someday in the dreamy “whenever.” The promise of “someday” isn't enough to lessen her grief today.

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It's crucial that we understand that Jesus isn't playing with her; he isn't teasing her or trying to point out her lack of spiritual understanding. But his promise that Lazarus will rise again holds a double meaning. There is a genuine miracle about to happen—just not one that changes the past. It will simply reverse the effects of the past and allow for a new future. But what is more important even than this about-to-explode-miracle, is what Jesus tells Martha next, and what that offers to her and to everyone reading this account, including us today.

Martha's view of the world has been reduced to a single lens: her entire frame of reference is defined by one thing—Lazarus is dead. Grief does that to you. The trauma and the pain are so great that they dominate your whole being. Everything is colored by this giant aching emptiness, like an emotional black hole that sucks everything into itself. So for Martha, the screen through which she looks at everything is this: *My brother is dead*. “Resurrection” is some dreamy future thing, completely out of her range of view. It's a doctrine that the rabbis taught, something religious that doesn't affect real life. She can affirm the doctrine (“*Yes, I believe he will rise again.*”). But her belief is tied directly to an

understanding of God that is mistaken—the God who is “way up there somewhere,” far removed from her pain, someone who is distant, unmoved; the God who is busy running the world, too busy to come to her in her grief, too busy to come when she asked for help.

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Jesus forces her to face the issue head-on: “*Martha, I am the resurrection and the life (eternal life, the true and lasting life, the life that overcomes the grave and death)—right now, right here, with you. Do you believe that?*” Not just a doctrine. Not just an event in the distant future. Jesus is calling her to a new understanding, a new way to see everything. Death is not final. More important, death is not determinative. It isn’t the filter that colors everything in your world.

Jesus is not suggesting that she needs to pretend that death is not real. Not at all. Lazarus is dead, and he is in the tomb. But Jesus invites Martha (and us!) to hold onto something that isn’t defined only by what we can see and touch and what we feel, but by *who he is* and *what he has said*. Faith is seeing Jesus now and holding onto him, to his word, that he is the resurrection, that resurrection is a greater reality than death itself, even while I am staring straight at a tomb that holds my dead loved one.

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That’s when Martha’s faith makes the turn. “*I know you, Jesus. I do believe in you, the Messiah, the Son of God. I know you, not just a doctrine. Not just ‘someday.’ I know you, my Lord, my everything.*” Resurrection isn’t an event for someday. It is knowing Jesus now, when death is all around me, when grief is all I can feel or see, when he hasn’t done anything to change anything that has happened, and I can’t see anything that he has promised yet. It is holding onto the truth of the resurrection, not as a doctrine, but as the reality of the living Jesus who is with me in the middle of my pain, in the middle of my grief, in the middle of my unsatisfied longing for a miracle, in the middle of circumstances that haven’t changed. He is my promise of the resurrection right now.

[Slide 16] *Mary’s response*

The story continues as Mary enters the picture. Mary shows us something different in her response. Oh, it starts the same, with the same accusation, the same piteous plea. “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” But then Mary simply collapses in grief, weeping. She is in shock—has been for four days. She is utterly devastated, broken and confused. The loss of her brother is inexplicable. Jesus loved her brother. He could have easily healed him. Why didn’t he come when they sent for him?

Mary is distraught; she doesn't understand. *Why is my brother dead? Why did he have to die? Why didn't you come to heal him?* And part of her confusion comes from the questions that lie underneath those questions: *If you are the Messiah, if you are doing all of these miraculous healings that signal the coming of the kingdom, why are we still dying? Why isn't everything fixed?*

[Slide 17]

Now we're getting to the root of the problem. The problem isn't just that Lazarus has died. It's that anyone has died. It's that people are still dying. *You promised the kingdom was coming. But people are still dying. I thought you were supposed to be the Messiah. I thought you said God cared for us. Why doesn't he do something? Why did my ____ die?*

[Slide 18] *God's answer*

I think that "why" questions are really important. (Of course I would, I'm a "why" question kind of guy.) It's just that there are a lot of "why" questions that aren't going to be answered just yet. God hasn't told us those answers yet. Yelling them more forcefully at the sky isn't going to bring us an answer that explains to our satisfaction everything that we want to know. So we have to learn to listen for the answers that God does give us.

But here's the thing: God did give us an answer to this particular "why" question: *"Why didn't you do something?"* The trouble is, it doesn't sound like an answer to the question. But it *is* God's answer. It's found in the shortest verse in the Bible—John 11:35: *"Jesus wept."*

[Slide 19] *The appearing of the God who weeps*

John 11:35 sets Christian faith apart from every other religion in the history of humanity. John 11:35 tells us something about God that no other god in history can claim—*our God weeps*.

Let's understand this. I've heard preachers say that Jesus wept because of the unbelief of the crowd (or of Mary and Martha, or the disciples), that he wept because he was perturbed by their lack of faith in his ability to raise Lazarus from the dead. I don't believe that for a second.

What moved Jesus to tears was not the lack of faith in the crowd around him, but the reality of death itself. He wept because he cared about Lazarus and Mary and Martha and the people who were crying over Lazarus' death. He wept because in that moment, all of the pain of human history, all of the disease and poverty and suffering and death that had come to his creation, to the people he had created, whom he loved; all that had come upon humanity because of sin from Adam until that moment were captured in the death of this one man, his friend, Lazarus—and Jesus felt it all. All of the pain of loss that his sisters, whom Jesus

also loved, and their neighbors and friends, all of the combined grief and sorrow—Jesus felt it all. And so he wept.

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Eight centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah said this of the Messiah:

3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[Slide 21]

“*A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*”: Jesus wept—and showed us in his weeping that he was one of us. This was what he did about all of the pain and suffering and death in the world, all of the sorrow and the grief. He understands our pain, because he has entered into this world with all of its pain. God wasn’t just sitting “away up there somewhere,” oblivious to our suffering, unmoved and uncaring. No, he came in the person of Jesus, who showed us that what happens to us matters to God. What hurts us touches the emotions of God. He wept because he felt all of the pain that was ours. He had come into this world in order to take the cause of that pain away, to put an end to sin and death. He had become one of us to bear our suffering and our pains upon his own tortured and crucified body, in order to defeat death and heal us from our sins forever.

[Slide 22]

I understand this a lot better than I did before we had kids. I’m not an overly emotional person normally. By that I mean that I don’t show my emotions outwardly easily or often or excessively. But there’s an exception—there’s one thing that breaks me, that gets all my emotions rolling and pouring out of me—and that’s when it involves my kids, particularly if they’re in pain. There isn’t anything that hurts more than seeing your children hurting. There isn’t anything that grabs you emotionally more than having to watch them when they’re suffering. You want to take it all on yourself, to somehow transfer all of their pain onto your back so they can be free from it.

[Slide 23]

Listen! God understands that—because he feels that way too. If I, an imperfect father, feel like that toward my kids, how much more must God, the

perfect Father, feel that way toward us, his children? (Remember, we're created in his image, not the other way around, so he felt that way first!)

And he not only feels that way emotionally—he has chosen to act. He has actually taken our pains on himself; he has taken our sins and the penalty for our sins upon himself on the cross. You ask, “*Why hasn't God done something?*” The answer is, “*He already did.*”

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But someone will say, “*But there are still people dying. In the story he brought Lazarus back to life. He did a real miracle. Why doesn't he do that now? Why doesn't he do that for everyone?*”

All I can say is this—and it may not be an adequate answer for you right now, but it's all that God has shown us so far. First, he still does occasionally bring people who have died back to life. It's not common (at least not in the West), but it happens. But second, and more to the point, even after God did the miracle of raising Lazarus from the grave, Lazarus eventually died again and was buried. The people God has raised from the dead in the centuries since Lazarus have all died (or will die, if it happened recently, unless the Lord returns first).

You see, when we ask God to “*deliver us from evil,*” his answer is “*I will.*” But he doesn't remove every painful possibility from our pathway. Not yet. Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God with its promise of eternal life without pain or sorrow. But the fulfillment of that promise is still ahead of us. Eliminating all causes of grief or sorrow awaits a future time. In the meantime, we have the promise of the presence of the one who said, “*I am the resurrection and the life*”—right now, in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of shingles outbreaks, or financial problems, or anxiety attacks, or job stresses, or the funeral of a loved one. Or ongoing grief from losing a loved one. Just know that when you're weeping, he is nearer than you know, and he weeps with you, brokenhearted over your pain, and offers to carry it away from you. When we ask God, “*Why?*” his answer is not an explanation, but his presence. He comes to us in our grief, joins us in our pain. He enters into our grief, invites us to believe in him, to let him carry away our pain, and promises us resurrection that will swallow up all the grief with endless life. “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*” That is the question for us today.

[Slide 25] *Transition to communion*

[*Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .*]

We are about to take communion. For those of you watching at home, if you have a piece of bread and some grape juice, or something that can stand in for them, go ahead and get them now, and set them aside for a moment.

When we take communion, we rehearse the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection again, we remind ourselves of the victory over death that is ours through the cross. That is our message; that is what we proclaim to the world when we celebrate communion: that Jesus died for sins, the just for the unjust in order to bring us to God. He is the only way to be reconciled with God, the only way to be free from the fear of death. He bore your sins, paid the price that you owed, so that you could be reconciled to the Father. His death is the only sacrifice that can pay for your sins, your rebellion. He loves you and he will freely pardon you, if you sincerely repent from running your own life and living by your own rules, and come and surrender your life to him. You can commit your life to him right now.

If you are making that commitment to Jesus now, please let us know. We'd like to help you in your walk with Christ, and we can't unless we know who you are and what you need.

While the elements are being distributed, Judy is going to play a portion of a piece composed by a Japanese pianist who has been blind since birth. It's a piece he wrote in memory of those who were killed in the tsunami of 2011. As she plays, listen, not just to the music, but to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who right now is bringing his comfort for all that you and I have lost, with the promise of resurrection that is ours through Jesus Christ.

Please hold the elements and we'll take communion together once we've all been served.

[END]

Benediction /Blessing

In order to maintain our safe distancing practice, the ushers will dismiss you this morning by rows. So please wait to leave until they indicate for you to do so.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]