

Some Certain Sign

John 11:1-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In her marvelous book *Prayer in the Night*, Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren tells the story of her friend Julie, whose infant son had to undergo surgery.

As the nurses were about to wheel him into the operating room, Julie looked at her husband and said, “We have to decide right now whether or not God is good, because if we wait to determine that by the results of this surgery, we will always keep God on trial.”¹

I paused on that sentence when I first read it. I read it again. And then again. I finished the chapter and went back and read it again. Then I made Naomi listen to it over breakfast.

We have to decide in advance, or we will always keep God on trial. It made me squirm and wrestle and think, which is what the best sentences do.

I think that many of us live our lives sort of implicitly keeping God always on trial.

We are given this bucket full of beliefs about God and Jesus and love and peace and goodness and a cross and an empty tomb and about how this gives meaning and hope and direction to life.

We inspect the contents of this bucket and find them inspiring and worthy, or at the very least plausible enough in the face of the mystery of this world we live in.

And as long as our lives sort of hover above an indeterminate threshold of suffering, they serve us well enough.

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 27.

But then we get a bit older. And a bit of trouble comes our way.

Maybe it's sitting with a kid outside an operating room. Maybe it's a diagnosis of our own. Maybe it's suffering abuse from someone we thought loved us.

Maybe it's recognizing that the world does not seem to be arranged with the best interests of people with our skin colour or history in mind.

Maybe it's a divorce or a vocational crisis or watching a kid blunder down dead-end roads or decades of chronic pain. Maybe it's the death of someone we love.

Trouble comes in many different shapes and sizes.

Most of us aren't tempted to question the goodness or existence of God with the run-of-the-mill struggle that is just part and parcel of life. But when this big stuff comes along, our bucket with all its beliefs starts to seem a bit less inspiring and worthy.

We may never say it out loud or so bluntly and irreverently, but God's leash begins to grow ever shorter.

I still believe, but... if my wife should leave... or if the test should come back positive... or if the prodigal should never return... or if the surgery should fail... well then God will have failed the test.

What good is a God who doesn't come through when it counts? What does it even mean to say God is good when my life seems bad?

On one level this view of God is easily understandable. How else would we evaluate whether or not someone was good or kind or merciful or loving if not by looking at the evidence?

We certainly do this with our fellow human beings. If you tell me that your friend is wonderful and kind and generous, yet they never seem to want to hang out with you, and when they do, they are stingy and petty and grouchy, I will probably question your evaluation of your friend.

God's relationship to human beings is obviously on a different order than that of two human beings. God is God and we are not.

As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9).

But “we have to decide in advance” can sound an awful lot like an avoidance of reality. It’s like sticking our fingers in our ears and yelling “I don’t care what you say, God is still good” no matter how bad things are.

And yet. That sentence speaks to our best intentions and deepest longings when it comes to faith and hope and love.

It speaks to a solidity of faith that takes a longer view and embraces the possibility that pain can be among God’s means of growing us into maturity.

It reminds us that faith is not math, that there is much that we don’t see, that love is too deep and true a thing to be reduced to the acceptability of our circumstances at any given moment.

I love how Warren puts it:

If the question of whether God is real or not—or of whether God is kind or indifferent or [worse]—is determined solely by the balance of joy and sorrow in our own lives or in the world, we will never be able to say anything about who God is or what God is like. The evidence is frankly inconclusive.... **We cannot hold together human vulnerability and God’s trustworthiness at the same time unless there is some certain sign that God loves us.**²

Some certain sign that God loves us.

What would some certain sign that God loves Mary and Martha and Lazarus look like in our gospel text this morning?

Well, it might look like sharing in their suffering. Jesus weeps at Lazarus’s tomb, we read.

² Warren, 27-28.

The text says that upon seeing the distress of those mourning Lazarus, Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (this, despite apparently already knowing what he was going to do).

Jesus shares in our pain. And sharing in the pain of another human being is surely a sign of love. But by itself this is not enough, at least not for God.

In this case, the certain sign of God’s love involved a miracle.

Jesus summons Lazarus out of his tomb, demonstrating that he is indeed Lord over even death.

Now, the most natural response to the story at this point is to say, “Yeah, well that’s pretty amazing. But Lazarus is kind of the exception to the rule. Dead people tend to stay dead. And even Lazarus would go on to die a normal death.

As far as signs go, it’s a pretty good one. But does it really help us in our own trouble all these years later?

These are the questions that the guys in jail asked me on Monday when we looked at this same story.

I told them what I will tell you this morning. The raising of Lazarus is a sign that points beyond itself.

The raising of Lazarus is the last of seven signs in John’s gospel.

- Changing Water Into Wine (John 2:1-11)
- Healing the Royal Official's Son (John 4:46-54)
- Healing the paralytic at the pool (John 5:1-18)
- Feeding over 5,000 with fish and loaves (John 6:1-14)
- Walking on the water (John 6:15-25)
- Healing a man born blind (John 9:1-41)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-46)

Changing, healing, healing, feeding, walking, healing, raising.

These verbs together point to a world made new. A world where none go hungry, where sickness doesn’t ravage human lives, where storms don’t threaten.

A world where life, not death, is the last word.

The raising of Lazarus and all the other signs serve a very specific purpose for John.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31).

For the Christian, of course, "some certain sign that God loves us" is the sign of God incarnate dying on a cross and being raised to new life.

This is where the question of God's goodness and love and mercy and forgiveness and devotion to his sin-sick prodigals was once and for all made plain. This is where the true nature of God is revealed for all time.

This is the certain sign, the reason that we can avoid living our lives with God constantly on trial, deciding in advance of whatever troubles we will face—and we *will* face them—that God loves us and that God is good.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, Jesus' question to Martha in the middle of the story is addressed to us, too:

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. Do you believe this (John 11:25-26)?

Do you? Do we?

I pray that as the events of Holy Week draw ever closer, we would answer as Martha did:

Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world (John 11:27).

Amen.

