***(Wrote this meditation in Wegman's when the power went out!)***

**Singing Through Tears**

John 11:17-35

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee  
 How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
 Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee  
 How great Thou art, how great Thou art*

*When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
 And lead me home, what joy shall fill my heart  
 Then I shall bow with humble adoration  
 And then proclaim, my God, how great Thou art*

Could anyone be more insensitive? Why can't these people see that Lazarus is about to die? Why are they in denial? Let's face it: When Lazarus falls ill and is getting close to death, those around him appear distracted and confused by what Jesus is telling them. And when they open their mouths to console or to make sense of death, their words are far from comforting, especially for anyone going through a time of grief and loss.

Even Jesus seems more interested in making theological claims about himself than coming to grips with the reality of his friend's demise. Indeed, when Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is getting sicker and sicker as each hour passes, what does Jesus do? He turns to his disciples and says, "This illness isn't fatal. It's for the glory of God so that God's Son can be glorified through it." And then he decides to stay where he is for an additional two days. When it comes to hearing the news that a dear friend is wasting away, there is no rushing Jesus. And when Lazarus finally dies and Jesus finally arrives on the scene, the gospel writer tells us that four days have already passed by. No doubt, Jesus loved Lazarus, loved Mary, loved Martha, but apparently he could not book an earlier flight.

And what do we think of Martha's greeting to Jesus? When Martha rushes out to greet her friend and teacher, instead of saying "*Hello"* or *"I'm so glad you came"* or "*Better late than never,"* or falling into his arms or saying nothing, out of her mouth comes a cruel and cutting comment: "*Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died."*

And later when Mary arrives, she says the same thing. Mary falls at the feet of Jesus and essentially says to him:

*"You weren't there when we needed you the most, Jesus."*

It's almost like Martha and Mary exchanged some notes and before Mary dashed out the door, Martha said to her: "Go tell him again; he deserves it."

Lazarus' sisters pile on the guilt. They express their deepest disappointment. They are searching for someone, God, Jesus, doctors, nurses, themselves-- anyone to blame. That's called grief. Their words remind us again that if we're not sure what to say, we are under no obligation to fill an awkward silence with words, especially when we don't have anything useful to say.

It was a time when I was doing funerals for the local mortuary in town. I was serving a rural parish as pastor and, on occasion, the town mortician called me to ask me if I would officiate at a service at the funeral home for the unchurched.

*"Do you want me to say a prayer or read a scripture passage?"* I asked one family.

*No."*

*"Do you want a hymn or homily or eulogy for your loved one?*

*No."*

*"What do you want me to do, then?"*

*"Following the prelude, we want you to thank people for coming and then instruct them to walk by the open casket and then join us for the reception."*

So, on the day of the memorial, that's what I did. I stood in front of 70 people, thanked everyone for coming and then invited them to the reception. The service lasted no more than 5 min. Of course, I felt embarrassed that I had not done more and I think a few attendees were also surprised at the brevity of it all. Still, I will never forget how, during the reception, a small balding man with a mustache approached me to shake my hand while palming me a 20.00 bill. Then he said to me: *"Best sermon I have ever heard."*

It was strange.

I had not attempted to say anything pastoral or comforting.

I hadn't even prayed.

I had barely mentioned the deceased name.

I had only been present.

I wonder. I wonder if "being present" isn't part of what underlies the story of Lazarus: that underneath the theological claim that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, there isn't also here a poignant insight into human grief. And that the story Lazarus embodies one the early church creeds and affirmations: that Jesus Christ was, is and always will be fully human and fully divine.

Look at all the attempts to address grief and loss in this story: Look at all the misspent and misspoken words that pass back and forth between people while Lazarus lay dying and after he dies: words are exchanged discussing reasons for his death; someone speculates that Lazarus' death will someday serve a greater purpose. Some old neighbors from Jerusalem show up to offer Mary and Martha words of consolation--so many words, so many words said through flowing tears. Indeed, setting all logic and reason and words and theology aside, take note that Jesus only begins to cry when he is invited to see the body of his dear friend...and in that moment, being fully present with Mary, being fully present with Martha, being fully present with the grieving community, Jesus' tears catch up with him.

I have sat at the bedside of many people like Lazarus--people who bravely faced the end their lives. I have listened to many stories while holding their hands. I have offered prayers and read and recited Psalm 23 many times.

She was a mother and loved her teenage children and hated leaving them behind.

He was dying of AIDS, with painful lesions up and down his arms, and he was crying out for God's mercy while I prayed at the foot of his bed.

She sang in the church choir and was the principal of an elementary school and so our choir gathered in her living room one afternoon to tearfully sing her to heaven.

Lying in a hospital bed and surrounded by his family, a man my age, looked into my eyes and said: "I've invited you here, pastor, because it's your job to give me comfort. I still have things to do in this life. And now, I will not be able to get to them. Why has this happened to me? Why?"

Yes, over the years, I have sat at the bedside of many people like Lazarus and I will tell you: the greatest gift we can give to anyone facing the end of his or her life is to be fully present with that person. Remember, it's not about the amount of time we spend with him or her, rather it is about staying in the moment and not looking too far ahead or planning what comes next. Jesus weeps because he becomes fully present and, to me, this to me what it means to be fully human.

In 1991, Jerry Sittser, a professor of religion at Whitworth College in Spokane, WA, was driving home from a powwow held on a Native American reservation in Idaho. It had been a family educational fieldtrip and everything was going along well until a drunk driver swerved over the line and crashed into his car. Seated in Sittser's minivan were his mother, his wife, Lynda, and their four children, and Jerry Sittser recalls the chaos and helplessness he felt as he watched life slip away from his mother, his wife of twenty years, and their 4 year old daughter.

Fast forward ten years to 2001 when I attended a conference in Spokane, WA at Whitworth College and heard Jerry Sittser give a lecture on his experience. He had written the book entitled, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through* Loss and after hearing his theological reflections on catastrophic loss and the nature of God, someone basically asked Sittser how he got through it and what helped him heal. And that's when Sittser talked about how each night when he came home from work and how he would sit in his living room for hours and hours listening to Faure's *Requiem*. For weeks and weeks, Sittser could not find the words to describe his feelings nor hear any words of comfort from those around him; yet, sitting alone in the darkness, Faure's Requiem, especially that last movement, *In Paradisum,* sang to his grieving heart and mind. Sittser wrote: *"Such music touched the anguish of my soul and gave me peace."*

As we take communion this morning, eating and drinking, I invite us to become fully present: to become present to those around us, to taste this bread and taste the fruit of the vine. And then as sing, *How Great Thou Art,* to let this hymn touch our souls and give us peace. Because I am coming to believe that the more fully present we are with someone we love or with a person nearing the end of his or her life, the more fully human we become. Amen.