



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# No Tragic Number

Rev. Jason Freyer

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

I am excited to share some good news with you this morning: The Pittsburgh Penguins have clinched a playoff berth! Unfortunately for those of us who really love hockey, this fact robs us of some of the drama that typically exists this time of year. So we have to create some! The Philadelphia Flyers are currently chasing a playoff spot. Many people who follow sports know what the “Magic Number” is; the amount of points a team needs to secure to make the playoffs. What some of us have started following is the “tragic number,” the number of points that if the team ahead of you earns means your elimination from playoff contention. At the moment, the Flyers tragic number is four, which means if they lose two games, or the team ahead of them wins two games, or any combination therein, they lose.

I remember a few years ago when the Penguins were chasing the playoffs, just on the bubble of getting in. I remember knowing that if the Tragic Number was one or greater, we had hope. As long as that number never reached zero, we were ok. We had hope.

The question I want to pose to us this morning is whether or not we have a Tragic Number when it comes to God. Is there ever a point at which we are too far gone, where hope ceases to exist? The Sunday school answer is “of course not!” But I wonder how deeply we believe that. I have known Christians who live as though there is a Tragic Number with God, a point at which we’re too far gone. Perhaps you have struggled with the same sin over and over and over again, and feel like certainly God has given

up on you, right? Or perhaps you haven't been to church in a few weeks, or months, or years, or decades. Surely God is not listening any more, right? I've even known some folks who would say that they've committed such an egregious sin, that a truly good and loving God could never forgive that. These are folks who live with a Tragic Number in mind.

Truth be told, I think that our attitude in those situations has more to say about us than it does the character of God. When we feel like God has given up on us because we fall in to the same sin over and over again, is it because we've given up on ourselves? When we feel like God isn't listening to us any more, is it because we aren't talking to God? If we feel like God can't forgive the big huge sins we carry, is it because we don't want to forgive ourselves?

This brings us to this morning's Gospel lesson. We hear about a family that knows Jesus quite well, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. These are folks who know Jesus, who have traveled with him, heard him teach, and been with him for the high moments as well as the low. So naturally, when their brother Lazarus falls ill, the sisters send for Jesus. And Jesus's reaction is to...wait. He doesn't hop right to it, but rather waits around in the town he is teaching. The answer to the sister's prayer doesn't come right away. And as a result of all this waiting, Lazarus dies.

This of course leads us to some upset sisters. As Jesus is finally on his way to meet the sisters, Martha runs to meet Jesus on the road. She has this deep, painful, and stinging statement for him. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Oh! There's such pain in her statement. It's like she's asking "What were you doing? Why didn't you help us, Jesus?" But at least she can meet Jesus face to face. Mary is so distraught that she can't even bring

herself to leave the house. Eventually Jesus finds his way to her, and she has the same statement. She's mad at Jesus.

In the midst of all of this, John reminds us that Jesus, even though he is in fact the Son of God, the Word made flesh, he is human. In the shortest verse in all of scripture we find some of the most powerful and meaningful words. "Jesus wept." He is real. He is like us. He has emotions. He weeps. He stands in the moment and feels its gravity. I always found it interesting that the Hebrew word for "holiness" is *kavod*, which literally means "weight, or heavy." In this short verse, as he's weeping, Jesus knows he's standing on holy ground. Jesus feels the weight of the situation. Anyone who has sat with someone in their grief knows exactly how this feels.

John also wants us to know that this is game over for Lazarus. The King James Version of the Bible has an interesting way to put this: "he stinketh." Lazarus hasn't brought a breath into his lungs in 4 days. It turns out that in the Jewish tradition, after 3 days a soul can no longer enter back into the body, it has to go to Sheol, the realm of the dead. John is trying to make sure that we understand that Lazarus is really, truly, and completely dead.

Death is a pretty powerful foe. But, it is not powerful enough for Jesus. Jesus speaks a word, and Lazarus draws breath into his lungs. He walks out of the tomb, grave clothes and all, fully alive. It leaves us with the question: If death can't beat God, what could?

I have spent some time this week listening to the rock band Coldplay, and in one of their songs they try to imagine what it would be like if death, that shadowy figure with the reaper

and the hood, what if he had friends? Who would death's friends be? Shame? Regret? Bullying? Political Facebook fights? Racism? Sexism? Materialism? Depression? Anxiety? If we stop and think about it long enough, we realize that death has a lot of friends!

Jesus's words to Martha are incredible here. Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. It means that death and all of his friends are not match for Jesus's power. Even the driest of bones have no chance against the word of Christ. There is no Tragic Number; there is no point at which you are too far gone for God's love. If you are stuck in a cycle of shame, Jesus wants to breathe life into you. If you are a victim of bullying and people assaulting your character, Jesus wants to breathe life into you. If you are like me, shaking your head at the untold horrors of war and racism and sexism in our world, Jesus wants to breathe life into us.

Admittedly, it can be hard to feel Jesus at work in those dead places in our lives. This is why it is so critically important that we speak life to each other again and again. It's so incredibly important that we proclaim the Good News to each other. We remind each other again and again that there is no Tragic Number, that we are not too far gone, and that there is resurrection and life available to all.

We see this play out in the weighty situations of our lives. We have a tendency to hold people who are in mourning, who are surrounded by death and all of his friends, at arm's length. Maybe we're afraid we'll get pulled down with them. Maybe we're afraid that we'll say the wrong thing, give the wrong advice, and make matters worse. Or maybe if we're honest, we just don't want to be surrounded by such darkness.

But we remember through the story of Lazarus that the dark places, the weighty places, that's where God's holiness is most on display. Have you ever been there when someone stuck in depression finds their life in Christ? Have you ever been there when someone who has been made to feel awful about who they are is welcomed into a new group of friends? Have you ever been there when someone on the edge of death found new life? In each of these places we're reminded of the weight of God's glory, that with God there is no Tragic Number, that with God there is no victory for death and all of his friends, and that resurrection is not something saved for the end times, but that we experience little resurrections each and every day of our lives. And it's all beautiful! It's a true sight to behold.

So this morning, I leave us with two challenges:

If you are on the edge, just barely hanging on, remember that there is no Tragic Number with God. There is no point at which you are too far gone for the goodness and love of Christ. And here at Westminster, there is no shortage of people who want to share in that with you. There are folks here who want to listen. There are folks here who want to love. There are folks here who want to pray. There are folks here who want to help. Seek them out, and allow them to help you find the life of Christ in this world!

And if you are in a good place, feeling rich and full of life, charge into those weighty places and proclaim good news! There is life available to all! God has the last word in every situation, and it's a good word! This is a message that our world is desperate to hear, and Jesus has invited us to share it with him!



My friends, there is no Tragic Number. There is no point at which you are too far gone. There is no death after which you cannot taste resurrection. And that, that is extremely good news!



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