

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-45

Jean was a rising young star in her field, stolen from Stanford for a plum tenure-track position. A single woman with family in the Dakotas, she never felt more alive than in Ann Arbor. Beloved by students, she was nominated for several teaching awards. On the morning of her 31st birthday, Jean awakened with stiff muscles, achy joints, and blurry vision, eventually diagnosed with a debilitating neuromuscular disease. Devastated but determined to stay in her home, within 18 months she was bed-bound, requiring nearly round the clock care. An assistant in her UM department, Beth, took action. Three times per week, she'd drive across town to bring Jean her favorite smoothie, read her mail to her, pay her bills, write dictated messages, and run errands. Beth asked me to bring Jean communion, a memorable moment, which led to one of our Stephen Ministers becoming a companion to her. For years, these women showed up every week, listening, being present, holding Jean's hand while she wept. Cards from Jean's students and colleagues were taped to her bedroom walls to comfort her. "You are in our thoughts and prayers," they said.

"Thoughts and prayers"... Three simple words. When the news is bad, and we feel powerless to fix it, each of us struggles to respond. We want safe, reassuring words that say we care, that despite not knowing what would help, and fearing we'll do something that *won't* help — our hearts go out to them, we look to the divine presence to be there when we can't. Thoughts and prayers alone aren't sufficient to get someone through a crisis, but when they are said authentically, they matter. I would never turn down heartfelt thoughts and prayers, and neither would you.

Let's place ourselves in this scene in the 11th chapter of John — pacing with Martha, sitting with Mary, worried with those wandering into and out of view who are bearing the heaviness of it all. If we had been there, what would we have said and done? Even now I wrestle with the right words to say to the grieving and those bent over by hardship. To the sibling who calls to share a devastating diagnosis, to the teenager beginning to question his gender assignment, to the colleague whose home burns down, to the pew buddy who finally returns to church but is shockingly gaunt, to the person with tears streaming during communion — what do you say? For those whose mental and financial well-being has been ravaged by isolation and loss, what do you do? Joining Mary and Martha in the scene finds me questioning how God asks me to be present in suffering.

In this unfortunate cultural moment, the phrase "thoughts and prayers" is quite complicated. A more up to date version of "my heart goes out to you," saying to someone that *you are holding them in your thoughts and prayers* is intended to infuse some comfort and strength. But the phrase has become politicized. For years, following mass shootings, our leaders offered heartfelt "thoughts and prayers." But nothing changed, even after Sandy Hook. They uttered these words in public, yet failed to exercise any moral agency, resulting in "thoughts and prayers" becoming a sad meme, used now online to troll those who say they feel bad but aren't taking any discernible action to end suffering. No matter your

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politics, we all despise empty comfort and hopeless resignation. Thoughts and prayers, thoughts and prayers, thoughts and prayers. The words succumb to semantic satiation and often lose their meaning.

But their meaning has value. Thoughts and prayers won't stop shootings, cancer, raging fires, disastrous droughts and dastardly dementia — but they help us cope with them, survive them and discern how to end them. They can be intentional, and a kind of action, even if we are asking someone else to act rather than finding ways to help ourselves. Prayer never replaces action. They are meant to go hand in hand.

With Lazarus' resurrection scene, we arrive at the 7th and last of Jesus' signs. The first, you might remember, was his turning water into wine. John uses these 7 stories to pull us more deeply into the full experience of Jesus and his purpose. Now, Jesus has previously fled the region for his life when he hears about Lazarus. He risks returning, a decision that seems like suicide to the disciples. Jesus arrives after Lazarus has been dead four days, meaning, in their beliefs, his soul has left his corpse for good. He's irretrievably dead. Jesus' delay is "so that you may believe," and fulfills the Old Testament prophecy, telling Martha he not only *causes* Lazarus' resurrection, he *is* resurrection. This costliest of the 7 signs sets in motion Jesus' journey to death. Jesus' raising a dead man will surely lead to his gaining a mass following, an insurrection, and the destruction of the nation, a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. The authorities decide he has to go.

The dramatic tension of the story draws us in. The sisters, bereft and blaming. Four frantic days. Holy tears falling. That stench. Jesus jarring shout – *come out!* John wants us to reflect on those times God has called us out of dark tombs of trauma; asks us to see ourselves as sisters, waiting and wondering when God will show up and answer our prayers; encourages us to claim comfort in the tears of a God who weeps. On All Saints Sunday, Christians revisit this moment to claim the promise of Jesus that death is not the final word for our loved ones. It is not the last word for us, either. The Resurrection and the Life cannot be kept from those who love him. Along with him, our loved ones will welcome us, unbinding us from this life and granting us sweet release and a welcome to our soul's true home. With our saints in residence there, we pray God sees fit to make a place for us in one of the many rooms in the household of heaven.

But ditch the drama with me of these moments and let's move into the background where we find those friends. The Jews are surely offering Mary and Martha their thoughts and prayers, and so much more. Read the whole chapter for the central role they play. See them, with Mary and Martha, cathartically weeping with those who weep. See them pointing Jesus in the right direction when the sisters were perhaps too angry or bereft to speak. Behold how they bear witness to the relationship Jesus had with Lazarus — *how he loved him*. Contemplate their courageous criticism of Jesus who could have kept this man from dying. Move close as they roll the stone out of the way so that God's purposes may come into the new light and life of day. Jesus honors them, and some find faith.

These are not thoughts and prayers. They are holding space for Mary, and Martha. They are holding space and teaching us to do the same. "Holding space" means being physically, mentally, and emotionally present for someone, walking alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them or making them feel inadequate, not trying to fix them, not trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control. It's not something only pastors and therapists do but that all of us are learning. "Holding space" is built in into our culture of compassion here at First Pres. It's what the Jews do for Mary and Martha, Jesus and Lazarus. Heather Plett's work on "Holding Space"* is formative and I commend it to you. Who are you holding space for today? Who is holding space for you?

When there was pastoral and program staff transition here a few years ago, there were some really hard days. Leadership changes find everyone deeply engaged with a congregation feeling a bit lost and uncertain. One of my friends who was paying attention determined to take me to lunch every other

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week. Another relentlessly called me to come over and settle in for a cup of tea. Holding space for me, they listened as I held on through the roller coaster of those days and, at times, catastrophized about the future. As they held me in their thoughts and their prayers, they pointed Jesus to my deepest fears. They joined me in questioning God's purpose and plan. In all that they did, they said: *The Spirit at work here. You don't have to fix it. Help is on the way.* During that same period, my dad and my mom died. At my mother's funeral in nowhere Florida, three First Pres members walked in, simply there listening to me preach with open ears and present with the eyes of love and support. They didn't judge me for my crazy family. They wept with me. Like Mary and Martha's friends, they felt called to bear witness in tangible ways to the whole community's thoughts and prayers. They held space for me.

Thoughts and prayers are not something to give up – but to place them in the larger bowl of friendship and faith that holds us together and replenishes our hope, and to take whatever action is needful – even sitting in non-judgmental silence, even picking up a smoothie, even sharing a cup of tea – until the stone is rolled away.

Our pastors and staff, our deacons, our Stephen Ministers, and you – *you there in the pew* – you know how to hold space for one another. You know who is there for you right now in the absence of the saints who held space for us while they lived.

Today allows us to remember them, and feel their presence here cheering us on. For as abundant as our life may be with Christ, it is still hard. That's why today is about more than communing with those who have died. It's about communing with those who now live. You and I are but saints-in-the-making who come to this table together, no matter our differences. In this holy space, artfully held, we set aside our sorrow on the way to our own someday sainthood.

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*I'm indebted to the works of Heather Plett, [The Art of Holding Space: A Practice of Love, Liberation, and Leadership](#) and Amy Wright Glenn, [Holding Space: On Loving, Dying, and Letting Go](#)