

**5 Lent
March 26, 2023**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

Let's get started with a couple questions: The first question: What are the qualities you look for in a friend?

And, question number two: How do you determine if a person is trustworthy? How do you decide if you can trust someone?

A couple weeks ago, in his sermon, Rev Jerry invited us to think of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well as a play. This morning, I would like to expand on this idea and invite us to think of the entire season of Lent as a play or a Netflix Series. Each Sunday in Lent, our gospel lesson is like another act or episode in the ongoing drama of Jesus' journey to the cross. And the title of this Lenten play or series is: "To Believe or Not to Believe." That is the question that is posed in each episode, each act of the play. And, that is the question we each have to answer over and over in the ongoing drama of our daily lives.

Let's begin by reviewing what we have seen so far in our Lenten drama, "To Believe or Not To Believe."

Act. 1: The play began on the first Sunday in Lent, right after Jesus' baptism, when he saw the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove and he heard the voice of God say, "You are my Son, my Beloved."

The curtain opens and we see Jesus on the stage in a bleak, barren wilderness. Enter Stage Right: **Satan**, who says, "I don't **believe** it. *If* you are the Son of God, prove it!" And Jesus responds, "No. God has not asked me to prove it. God has asked me to **believe** it. I **believe** God's word. I trust in God."

Satan came seeking proof before he would believe. But Jesus reveals that **believing** is not based on **proof**, it's based on trust. Satan exits. He chooses **not** to believe.

Act 2: The second Sunday in Lent. The curtain opens and the stage is dimly lit. We see Jesus, walking in the night. Enter Stage Right: **Nicodemus**, who says, "Rabbi, could we talk? I have some questions for you."

Their conversation ends with Jesus' words: "For God so **loved** the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who **believes in** him may not perish but may have eternal life." Nicodemus came seeking understanding. But Jesus reveals that **believing** is not based on **human understanding**, it is based on **trusting in God's love** that is made known in God's only Son. Nicodemus exits, not sure what to believe.

Act 3: The third Sunday in Lent. The curtain opens and we see Jesus sitting by a well. Enter Stage Right: **The Samaritan Woman**. She engages Jesus in quite a conversation, and it ends with Jesus telling her that he is the Messiah, something he has not told anyone else up to this point. And she **believes** him. She runs back to the village and tells everyone to come to the well and meet this one who she **believes** is the Messiah. Enter Stage Right and Left: All sorts of people gathering around Jesus to listen to him. And at the end of this act, they say to the woman, "We **believe**, for we have heard for ourselves, and we **know** that this is truly the Savior of the world." The people exit. They **believe** Jesus, but do they **believe in** him? They **believe** that what he says is true, but do they **trust in** him?

Act. 4: The Fourth Sunday in Lent. The curtain opens and we see a **blind beggar** sitting on the side of the road. Enter Stage Right: Jesus and his disciples. Jesus goes over to the blind man and proceeds to restore his sight. Enter Stage Left: The Pharisees. They had heard about this miraculous healing, and they do **not believe** it. They question the man, they question his parents, they bring the man in for further questioning, and when he continues to insist that Jesus restored his sight, they drive this man out of town.

When Jesus hears this, he goes and finds the man and says, "Do you **believe in** the Son of Man?" Now we need to remember that the blind man never actually seen Jesus. Jesus had put mud on his eyes and sent him off to wash in the pool of Siloam. So, the blind man does not recognize Jesus and answers, "Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may **believe in** him." Jesus responds, "You have seen him, and are seeing him right now, with your own eyes." And the man replies, "Lord, I **believe**," and he worships Jesus. The blind man exits, **believing**, having **seen** the light of the world.

And that brings us to today, **Act 5:** This act is a sort of dress rehearsal for what's coming in Act 6. In bringing Lazarus back to life, Jesus sets in motion his own death. When the Pharisees hear the news that Jesus has actually raised someone from the dead, their plot to kill Jesus begins in earnest.

This act of the Lenten play is full of emotion and drama. The characters in this act are the closest friends of Jesus—Lazarus, Mary and Martha. When Lazarus becomes gravely ill, his sisters send a message to Jesus asking him to come quickly. And when Jesus doesn't come immediately, when he doesn't show up until after Lazarus has died, they are hurt and angry. When Jesus finally arrives, the first thing they both say to him is, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Grief over the death of a loved one often includes second guessing and blaming, doesn't it? If only we had called the doctor sooner or tried that alternative treatment...If only the doctor had noticed the symptoms earlier...If only the medical

team at the emergency room had done this or not done that. For Martha and Mary, Jesus would have made the difference.

There are several scenes in this act, but in all of them, Jesus has only one focus: He intends to use this desperate situation to help his disciples, his friends and all those who are grieving to **believe in Him and the One who sent him.**

In the first scene, the disciples are trying to discourage Jesus from going to Bethany because it is too close to Jerusalem, where the Jews have already tried to stone Jesus. Once again, the disciples don't quite get what is going on, so Jesus tells them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may **believe.**"

In the next scene Jesus is with Martha, and he responds to her despair with the words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who **believe in me**, even though they die, will live...Do you **believe this?**" And Martha responds, "Yes, Lord, I **believe** that you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

In the third scene we see Mary, kneeling and weeping at Jesus feet, repeating Martha's words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Now, up to this point, Jesus has remained calm and focused, but now we see that Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit" and he begins to weep as he walks to the tomb of Lazarus. Those walking to the tomb with Jesus interpret his display of emotion as a sign of how much he loved Lazarus and his own sadness over the death of his friend. But that doesn't make sense because Jesus knows that he is about to bring Lazarus back to life. What is so distressing to Jesus is that no one seems to comprehend what his life is all about. He is at the end of his ministry. He is on his way to Jerusalem—to his own death. And his closest friends and disciples still don't get it. They say they **believe**, but they don't realize what it means to truly **believe in him and trust in the powerful, life-changing love of the One who sent him.**

In the final scene, the curtain opens and everyone is at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus says, "Take away the stone." Martha protests, "No! There is going to be a terrible smell. He has been dead for four days."

Jesus replies, "Martha, didn't I just tell you that **if you believe**, you will see the glory of God?"

Then Jesus prays out loud, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of those standing here, so **that they may believe that you sent me.**"

And Act 5 closes with these words: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had seen what Jesus did, **believed in him.**"

To believe or not to believe. For Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection had one singular purpose: that people would come **to believe in God—to trust in God**—through him. This is

how Jesus understood his purpose and this was his passion. Jesus wants us to place our trust in God—to rely on God.

In each of his encounters with the different characters in this Lenten drama, Jesus teaches us that there is more to life AND death than what can be seen with the eye, or grasped by our intellectual capabilities, or proven by our scientific advancements. There is a spiritual dimension to our living and our dying. There is a divine presence and power always at work in the midst of it all that we can trust to see us through. Jesus does not want us to be anxious and stressed out and overwhelmed and distraught over the little and big deaths that are part of human life. He wants to replace our fears with faith.

When my mother was dying, I was able to be with her and my father for what turned out to be the last 6 weeks of her life. It just so happened that they were the 6 weeks of Lent back in 1998. She died on Easter Sunday night, after we had all gone to bed.

Before I left to be with my mom and dad, a friend from our congregation gave me a book entitled Our Greatest Gift. It was written by Henry Nouwen, the renowned Dutch Catholic priest, author and theologian. My friend said, “This book will help you through it.” Oh, how right she was. Not only did this book help me through my mom’s death, but it has continued helping me through my life for the last 25 years. It has helped me continue to **believe in** Jesus and the One who sent him. In closing, I want to share a passage from this book. I hope it will help you through whatever difficult things you might be facing in your life right now.

Henri Nouwen writes:

The Flying Rodleighs are trapeze artists who perform in the German circus Simoneit-Barum. Rodleigh, the leader of the troop, is a good friend of mine. One day he was explaining the art of flying to me. “As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.” “How does it work?” I asked.

“The secret,” Rodleigh said, “is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.”

“You do nothing!” I said, surprised.

“Nothing,” Rodleigh repeated. “The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.”

When Rodleigh said this, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind, “Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.” Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, “Don’t be

afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and trust, trust, trust."

In just a few moments we will confess our faith together in the words of the creed. The Latin word for creed is *credo*, which is often translated today as "I believe." But its literal meaning is "**I give my heart to.**" A creed is meant to be language of the heart, a profound expression of commitment and trust, not simply a list of statements we believe are true. Today, as we say those words "I **believe in** God," let us remember what they really mean: "I trust in God. I rely on God. I give my heart to God." And when we come up for communion, and we hear those words, "This is the body and blood of Christ, given for you," let us remember that Jesus believes in us, trusts in us, gives his heart to us. And when we exit this stage today, may we go back out into the world, **believing**...trusting in God.

Would you join me in prayer? "Lord, we **believe**. Help Thou, our unbelief." Amen