

NOT OUR TIMETABLE

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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John 11:1-45

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TEXT: John 11:5-6 “Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

PURPOSE: To encourage our trust in God’s timing, and to invite us to receive the blessings God gives to those who wait for God in faith.

The story of the raising of Lazarus has a stunning conclusion: a man who has been dead for four days is brought back to life and returned to his sisters. Not only that, but it features Jesus making one of the most profound statements about himself and about those who believe in him:

“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.” (John 11:25-26)

We often hear these powerful, reassuring words of Jesus at funerals.

But I find the opening of this story to be quite disturbing. Let me run through it again. First, Lazarus’ sisters send word to Jesus that Lazarus, “whom you love, is ill.” I assume a messenger had to bring the message to Jesus personally. There was no cell phone, no text, no WhatsApp message. An actual human being had to travel for a few days to relay the message. In response, Jesus predicted that the illness wouldn’t end in death, but instead of returning to this anxious family, whom John again recalled that Jesus loved, he chose to stay where he was for two more days. The messenger returned to Mary and Martha not with Jesus, only with his assurance that Lazarus’ illness wouldn’t be fatal. Which, to a family anxious about their loved one’s condition, sounds a lot like someone saying, “There, there, it’s going to be all right.” Certainly the sisters would be within their rights to be a bit peeved that Jesus didn’t come in person. Jesus told his disciples that God would be glorified through what was going to happen with Lazarus. Phooey on God’s glory, is what I’d think if I was Mary or Martha. We’re not interested in God being glorified. We’re interested in Lazarus getting better, and Jesus, if he were here, could make that happen.

Finally, Jesus did show up, after Lazarus had been dead for four days. Not only had he not arrived in time to heal Lazarus; he’d missed the funeral. This feels like too little offered too late. The sisters appear to be thinking this: Both of them scold Jesus by saying, “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.” Every other healing Jesus accomplished, he did at the moment of need. Once, he even broke off a teaching ministry to go with a synagogue leader named Jairus

whose daughter was near death. (Mark 5:21) Why not do the same for friends, for people he knew and loved?

It turns out that the raising of Lazarus is a miracle for our time. Like the sisters, we are appealing to heaven: the world, which you say you love, is ill. Hey, God, can't you see that we've got a huge crisis here? This is no time for you to be taking your merry old time. This virus and global attempts to mitigate it are disrupting everything! Could you please come now and do something about this? Come on, God! What are you waiting for?

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not expecting God to wave a magic wand and wipe out the virus. That's not my point. My point is that God's timing is not our timing, and God's purposes are not our purposes. But, with us as it was with Lazarus, God's purposes and timing ultimately are not only for God's glory, but for our good.

Very often in my life, I've experienced God's timing being the right timing, even though it was not at all the timing I thought was right. I graduated from seminary in June of 1978, figuring I was quite ready for ordination and parish ministry. Instead, I waited for over a year without a call. I moved back in with my parents and waited breakfast and lunch tables in a hotel restaurant, settling for seventy-five-cent tips. Armed with a master's degree, I became a waiter, literally and metaphorically. It was frustrating and humiliating. But two things happened during that year-long period of waiting. First, I got involved in number of things which prepared me far better for ministry than my seminary education on its own could have. Second, I eventually was called to a ministry I wouldn't have thought of, but which was exactly what I came to believe God knew I needed to be formed as a pastor. The waiting turned out to be a gift from God. That's just one example of many in my life. Probably you can easily come up with similar examples in your life.

We, and the world with us, are in a waiting period of far greater consequence. We're waiting for just about everything, and the stakes are frighteningly high. Most important, we're waiting for the virus to run its course. In the meantime, health care workers are waiting for personal protective equipment. Hospitals are waiting for more ventilators and test kits. Many households are waiting for the

financial assistance that Congress has authorized. Businesses are waiting for help to keep them in business as people drastically cut back on all kinds of commerce. And perhaps, like Mary and Martha, we're waiting for Jesus to do something to make this better.

Here's an old word which remains a very present word for us: God gets graciously involved with those who wait for God. You probably know this beloved verse from Isaiah: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31) A calligraphy of these words hangs above my dresser, a daily reminder of what is possible for those who wait for the Lord.

What might God be doing with us while we wait? I am increasingly confident that God is at work in the souls and the lives of those who shift our waiting to be waiting for God. I wonder: just because Jesus didn't come when Mary and Martha wanted him to, did they give up waiting for him? When he didn't do what they wanted him to do, did they conclude that he would do nothing? Apparently not. When Martha met Jesus, with her brother dead in his tomb, she said, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." (John 11:22) Can we, in our waiting, cultivate confidence that God has a schedule and a plan that ultimately is for our good? As God had a stunning, totally unexpected conclusion in mind for Lazarus and his sisters, can we remain open to outcomes of this global crisis which are beyond our imagining, beyond our asking, but which God has in mind for the world God loves with all God's heart?

In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus did what no one could have imagined or asked for. In the raising of Jesus, God did what no one could have imagined or asked for. And what God did changed everything. What God did opened for us the gates leading to sharing the life of Christ, life over which death has no dominion, life over which fear has no power, life lived fully to the glory of God. No question about it: the course of this crisis is not our timetable. But those who trust that God has a timetable will, while we wait for God to do what only God can do, experience our strength renewed, because God is working on us through our waiting.