

March 29, 2020 – John 11:1-45

Waiting. That's all we can do right now. Read the news... and wait. Watch the press conferences... and wait. Take care of the necessities of life... and wait.

It's a little maddening, isn't it? Knowing how close we are to disaster, and yet, trying to stave off boredom. We should be grateful, I suppose. There are plenty of places that aren't waiting. That really are in the midst of disaster.

Italy. Spain. New York City. They would be happy to be waiting right now. Instead, they're struggling to keep up. But that doesn't really make it much easier for us to wait, does it?

No, we're not very good at waiting. Waiting always feels like a waste of time for us. The result of poor planning or someone else's failure. We get angry when we have to wait at the doctor or the post office. We get frustrated when we have to wait because of someone else's mistake. We can't stand to be told that things aren't ready for us the moment that we need them.

Those kinds of frustrations are easy to find an outlet when there's something or someone tangible to blame. We take it out on the clerk at the store or the broken down motorist on the highway or the waitress who was slow to bring us our food. Not that they usually deserve our wrath.

But at a time like this, it's harder to find someone to blame. How do you get angry at a virus? It can't hear you. It's barely even a living organism. And yet, it is making the entire world grind to halt. It is making us all wait.

And at a time like this, we tend to redirect our frustration from the creation to the creator. We get angry with God. And we start asking, "God, why do we have viruses? And why haven't you gotten rid of them by now? Why are so many people sick and dying? And most of all, why are You making me wait?"

That's not a new question. It's a very old one. In fact, King David asked it over and over again in the psalms. Psalm 13: *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* Psalm 35: *"How long, O Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions!"* Psalm 74: *"How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?"* Psalm 90: *"Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants!"*

These and many more times, David asks that same question, "How long, O Lord?" How long do we have to wait for you? How long do we have to suffer? How long until you fix this?

And it's the same question that was going through the minds of Mary and Martha and the disciples in our Gospel Lesson today. The raising of Lazarus. One of the most famous stories in all of scripture. One of the most important miracles Jesus ever did.

A miracle that, in fact, led directly to the events of next week: Palm Sunday. The Triumphal Entry. The crowd that gathered to meet Jesus in Jerusalem was there specifically because they had just heard about the amazing miracle that he had just done in Bethany, a couple miles away.

They wanted to meet this man who could raise the dead. They wanted to hear this prophet who could do miracles like Elijah. They wanted to praise this one who came in the name of the Lord.

And yet, this miracle doesn't start out with leaps of faith and shouts of joy. No, it starts out with a lot of sadness and frustration. Because Jesus is making everyone wait.

The waiting begins when Jesus hears about Lazarus' illness. We think the coronavirus with its mortality rate of 1-3% is bad. But it ain't nothin' compared to being sick in the time of Jesus. There were no ventilators. There were no antibiotics. There wasn't even aspirin to bring down a fever. When someone got sick, there was always a very real chance that they would die.

So when Mary and Martha contact Jesus and say, “Lord, he whom you love is ill,” this isn't something to mess around with. Whether they want Jesus to come heal Lazarus or just come to say goodbye before he dies, Jesus needs to go now.

But he doesn't. In fact, the text says something rather bizarre. *“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”*

St John writes it like it's the most normal thing in the world. Jesus hears that his beloved friend is sick, so he does nothing. Jesus waits. He makes the disciples wait. He makes Mary and Martha wait. Most of all, he makes Lazarus wait. And to our eyes, these are not the actions of a good friend.

I remember a few weeks ago. I was in my office on Sunday morning, preparing for the service, and I got a call from Cathy. She was supposed to teach the youth Bible class that morning, but a friend had called her and asked if Cathy could drive her to the hospital. And so Cathy dropped everything, went to her friend, and took her to the hospital.

Because of course she did. That's what a friend does. A friend does not make another friend wait. A friend shows up when they're needed.

So why is Jesus making them wait? Well, because he doesn't see this situation the same way everyone else does. He tells his disciples that from the very beginning. *“This illness does not lead to death,”* He says. Which is a little odd, considering it does lead to his death. But it doesn't end in Lazarus' death. That's what Jesus means.

And so this is not a life or death situation for Jesus. This is for the glory of God. And so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

This isn't about Lazarus being sick. This isn't about him dying. This isn't about how much he loves Lazarus. Everyone knows how much Jesus loves Lazarus. When he arrives at the tomb, he weeps for his friend. And everyone remarks, *“See how he loved him!”*

But they also say something else. *“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”* And that's a question many people in this situation are asking. “Mary and Martha both say the same thing, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*”

But to that, Jesus has only one response, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*

And then, their waiting ended. Then Jesus did the impossible. He opened the tomb of man so dead his body should have stunk with decay, and he said, *“Lazarus, come out.”* And Lazarus came out.

Why did Jesus make them wait? Well, because the raising of Lazarus wasn't just about showing them his power. They knew he was powerful. He had healed a man born blind shortly before this. We heard about it last week. He had healed lots of people, in fact. And they had absolute faith that if Jesus had been there, he would have healed Lazarus.

But even after all those miracles, they were still underestimating Jesus. They were still not seeing the world through his eyes. And in Jesus' eyes, death has so little power, it might as well be sleep.

He says that to the disciples when they finally leave to go to Bethany. *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”* Jesus thinks so little of death that he mocks its power. “Lazarus is taking a little nap. Let's go wake him up.”

Do you see how different Jesus' view of the world is from ours? To us, death is the most permanent thing in the entire world. It is the thing most worth rushing to a friend's side to prevent. It is the thing most worth getting anxious and fearful about.

But to Jesus, it's temporary. It's just falling asleep. It's easily fixed. It's not worth rushing over. Jesus waited 4 days, because that's all they really needed to understand his point. But he could have waited 40 days. Or 400 days. Or 2,000 years. And the result would have been exactly the same. When Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus would have come out.

I know that's true, because that's exactly what's going to happen to me. And to you. And to everyone who believes that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. On the last day, Jesus will descend on the clouds and say, "Joshua, come out!" And I will be raised.

And, in the end, it won't matter how long any of us waited. The result will be the same: eternal life with our Lord in a paradise that has no end.

Why do we have viruses? And why hasn't God gotten rid of them by now? Why are so many people sick and dying? And why is He making me wait?

Well, because in the end, "*It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.*" It is good to see this world through God's eyes. As a place of temporary suffering. A place of momentary affliction. A place where death is no more than falling asleep.

And as a place where the glory of God is revealed through the work of His Son. To give us more than a temporary reprieve from sin, death, and the devil. But instead to give us an eternal resurrection and a life forever with him. Amen.