

WHEN JESUS WAITS A SERMON ON JOHN 11:1-16

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

It was the spring of 1994. I had been working with Electronic Publishing International Corporation for almost a year. The company had quickly expanded since I had been there, and we had great hopes of securing contracts with Microsoft, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and RR Donnelly. We were all working 80 and 90-hour weeks. We had been promised stock options for when the company went public. We had dreams of being the next high tech success story — we thought we would all be millionaires and retiring by 35. But the contracts never came. Soon, there were layoffs. Then, we heard about emergency meetings of the shareholders. Then came the fateful day when we showed up to work and they told us to go back home — the company was bankrupt.

I didn't panic, however. I had a few months of reserve savings that could carry me through the summer. But if I didn't land a job by September, I would have to leave Winston-Salem and return home until I could get something. As the summer wore on and none of my resumes bore fruit, I began to despair. I was doing everything I could to find a job, but nothing came. As September came ever nearer, I was in crisis — I began to question what I was looking for — what I wanted my life to stand for. I spent hours in prayer, had painful conversations with Tammy, whom I had not yet married. I talked with my minister and parents. But no clear direction came to me. I felt scared and confused and I wondered when God was going to show up and help me out of this unexpected mess.

In today's passage, we see a scene where Jesus followers may have felt very similar feelings. The story this week introduces us to one of the most famous passages in the gospel of John — the raising of Lazarus. We're not dealing with the whole story today, but rather the prelude — the first act. John has given us rich details here about what happened, and I believe that these details are here for a reason. All throughout his gospel, John has shown us Jesus doing unexpected things. Usually, these unexpected actions, like turning the water into wine, or speaking to the woman at the well, were so that he could get past people's defenses and preconceptions to reveal to them his true identity.

In today's passage, we once again see Jesus doing the unexpected, and in so doing, he puts those who love him in very uncomfortable positions. Here

we see Jesus acting in ways that confuse and perplex his followers — and they don't get immediate resolution to that confusion and perplexity. That's the kind of confusion and perplexity that I experienced when I lost my job, and I'll wager that many of us have experienced it at some point in our lives — it's that place where we're stuck in the gap between the fantastic promise of abundant life and the painful reality of life in a fallen world. It's when we look about in confusion and hope that God will show up to make things right. But we wonder, "Why is he waiting?" It's when God's clear calling on our lives is to do something that is difficult, painful, or seemingly beyond our ability — it's when God wants us to do something totally beyond our strength or ability to manage that he shows himself. Let's not be surprised that confusion and perplexity are exactly where Jesus puts his followers in today's text and in today's world.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:1-16).

Look at verses 1-6. These verses introduce the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Twice in this section, John tells us that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. And word comes to Jesus that Lazarus was sick. Imagine for a moment — Mary and Martha watching their dear brother decline in health, gradually growing weaker and less responsive to their ministrations. They know that Jesus has incredible power to heal, and in their desperation, they send word to him that Lazarus is sick. Imagine the hoping and praying that their brother would simply hang on until Jesus the healer arrived. Imagine the anxious glances out the doorway to see if Jesus was coming up the road. And we know they felt crushing disappointment when Lazarus died. We hear that disappointment coming out later in chapter 10 as the sisters encounter Jesus again and both of them say, "Lord, if you had not been here, my brother would not have died."

Certainly Jesus would have understood that his friends were anxious and terrified. Certainly Jesus would have immediately felt empathy for his dear friends. But he waited. He didn't act. He waited for two days and during that time, Lazarus died. Jesus waited. This does not seem to be the action of a good friend. This does not seem to be caring and compassionate and loving. What kind of master would wait during such a time of crisis?

To compound the confusion, we have the scene with Jesus and his disciples. In 10:7-8, Jesus announces his intention to go back to Judea — the disciples protest: "If we go back, you and we might very well die!" After several lines of dialogue, he announces that Lazarus is dead, and they are going to wake him up. I can empathize with the disciples here because I'm sure they thought there was little that could be done for Lazarus. After all, didn't they watch Jesus wait when he received word of Lazarus's sickness? And yet now, contrary to any sort of common sense, Jesus goes back to that country where people want his head. With Mary and Martha, Jesus waits when they wanted him to go, and with the disciples he goes when they want him to wait. Therefore, this story indicates that there are times when Jesus, for his own reasons, leaves us in a state of confusion. We may not like it, but he does it.

In this case, perplexity only lasts for a few days before Jesus comes through in a miraculous way. However, there are many examples of God waiting much longer. In Genesis 12, God comes to Abram and makes a promise to him.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I

will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

"So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran."

God promises to make a great nation out of Abram, who is 75 years old. He has no children, but by faith, he sets out on his journey to follow God's instructions. After several years and no child, God and Abram had another holy chat that is recorded in Genesis 15:1-6. Years had passed by, and still God waited to make good on his promises. Years later, God appears to Abram again and this conversation is recorded in Genesis 17: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers'" (1-2). Abram, now Abraham, had waited 24 years for God to make good on his promise, and finally God delivered by making Sarah pregnant. Abram had to endure 24 years of confusion while he waited on God to show up and make something happen. But when God did show up, great things happened.

Such stories abound in Scripture — Joseph who was sold into slavery and languished in prison for many years, but God used him to deliver Israel and Egypt from famine. David, who was anointed as king by Samuel, but spent years on the run from King Saul. God finally showed up and made good on his promise to put David on the throne. Even the nation of Israel is a testament to the truth that God waits to show up. They spent years in slavery in Egypt before God showed up. Then centuries later, they were conquered by Babylon and spent a generation in captivity before God allowed them to return to the land. Even then, they spent 400 years under the domination of one empire or another, waiting for Messiah to come.

What hope is there for us then when God waits to show up in our lives? Our hope is that God does not leave us in perplexity and confusion forever. Eventually, God does show up. In our passage from John 11, Jesus gives very good reasons for putting his beloved into uncomfortable situations — verse 4 says, "This sickness will not end in death. No it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." That sounds similar to what Jesus said in chapter 9 when his disciples asked about the man born blind "... this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

When God waits to show up, he is preparing to show himself in such a way that He will receive maximum glory — He will reveal himself in a more stunning way than we have heretofore experienced. Our passage goes on to

explore this in more depth — in verse 14-15: “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.” God waits so that he might be glorified and so that our faith might be increased. God’s glory is related to our belief. We are his workmanship and we are created for His glory and one of the ways we increase His glory is through an increase of faith.

Think of the catalog of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. It starts with these words: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” and then it lists the great heroes: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham. In verse 13, we read this: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.” They saw only shadows of the blessing that was to come, and even though they never received the fullness of that blessing in their lifetime, they persevered. If those saints persevered, knowing only the shadows of hope, how much more then should we persevere, who have known the realization of that hope in Jesus Christ.

So, in the face of confusion, when Jesus seems to be waiting to enter into our lives, this passage challenges us to respond in faith by persevering in our discipleship with Christ. Look at verse 16: “Then Thomas, called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” Thomas has always been the victim of bad publicity — he is known as doubting Thomas for his skepticism before encountering the risen Christ. But here he is persevering Thomas. Not fully understanding what Jesus is doing, Thomas nonetheless sets his determination upon following Him. He sets his eyes upon Christ and says, “I don’t know what will happen to me; in fact, it may be very bad. But come what may, I will follow Him.” In the face of confusion and perplexity, Thomas’ example inspires us to persevere in faith and discipleship.

When I began that summer of unemployment, I had no idea what God was going to do. For three months I struggled with direction, and God used that time to nudge me toward a calling to ministry. At the end of the summer, a few weeks before I would have to move back home, I went on a weeklong missions trip. Before I left on the trip, I had a vague sense that I might be called, but when I returned, I was certain that I was called to ministry of some sort. I didn’t know what shape my ministry would take — whether pastoral, or scholarly or mission work or youth ministry. That would come later. God only gave me enough vision to carry me to the next step — seminary and a master’s degree. A couple of days after I got back from the trip, I was contacted by Wachovia Bank — I had interviewed with them just before I left, and thought the interview went quite badly. They offered me a job as a trainer and technical writer. Tammy, in her infinite wisdom, suggested that I take the job as an opportunity to buy time to sort out where I would go to school and discern greater direction for my ministry. I accepted, thinking I would only be there one year. One year turned into three as I learned skills of teamwork, technological skills, communication skills. God

used that time to work on my writing and particularly on my speaking — if you don't believe me, ask Tammy about the first sermon I gave during that time. Trust me, I've come a long way. After that summer of waiting, God gave me faith to see the next step. Then three years of waiting before God got me to seminary. Then four more years of waiting while God prepared me for this church. During these years, God has done amazing things in my life. He has strengthened my belief more than I ever dreamed. And the story isn't done yet. My story isn't done. The story of God's work in this church isn't done. And the story of God's work in your life isn't done. Will you take up the challenge of discipleship by delay?