

## **Encounters with Jesus: When Jesus Arrives Late**

John 11:1-6, 17-44

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on March 12, 2017]

### I

About ten days ago I had the kind of dream that is every pastor's worst nightmare.

I dropped Libby off at the church where we are members, First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio, at 9:00, but then it dawned on me that the service here in Portland started at 9:30 and I was an hour and a half away.

I was going to be late, and I needed to call someone to let them know I would be late. I thought, maybe I should call Eric Rogers or John Young.

I parked my car to make the call, but then the car rolled backwards into the bushes.

Then a member of the church, Ev Telljohann and his late wife Nancy (she's been dead about 10 years) were in the car, and I had to drop them off at the church too.

Then I was sitting on the far left side of the sanctuary (when we are there we always sit on the right side of the sanctuary), talking with my late friend John Thorn, whose memorial service I preached in November (do you see a theme of death in this dream?!).

And all the while I am anxious to let you folks here in Portland know that I am going to be late—I am an hour and a half away and the service starts in 30 minutes.

And I think, maybe we can have an evening service and I can preach the sermon then.

And at about that moment in the dream I woke up, relieved that it wasn't Sunday morning and I wasn't going to be an hour late to church.

For preachers dreams like that—

going into the pulpit without a sermon prepared,  
not having any clothes (I've dreamed that a few times),  
or being late for worship,  
are the stuff of nightmares.

## II

One of the most puzzling things about the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11 is the fact that Jesus is late on purpose.

It's not a dream...

it's not a nightmare...

Jesus deliberately plans to arrive **after** Lazarus has died.

Jesus receives word that Lazarus is ill in the village of Bethany, some 25 miles distant from where Jesus and his disciples are at the Jordan River.

The urgency of the situation is underscored by the fact that Lazarus being ill is mentioned three times in the first three verses.

John makes it clear that Jesus is in no hurry to respond.

Even though Jesus loved Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha,  
nevertheless, Jesus waits **two full days** after word reaches him about Lazarus.

By that time, of course, it is too late—Lazarus is dead.

When Jesus finally does arrive, both Martha and Mary pour salt into the wound by pointing out to Jesus that his tardiness has cost a life.

"Lord, if you had been here," they both say, "my brother would not have died"  
(John 11:21, 32).

Indeed, Jesus was not there,  
    Jesus intended not to be there,  
        and Lazarus did die.

It makes us wonder, what was Jesus thinking?

What kind of person would dally around while a dear friend lies dying?

Receive word that a loved one is ill unto death,  
    and what's the first thing you do?

Start packing...  
    jump in the car...  
        head to the airport...  
            get there as fast as you can.

What could possibly have kept Jesus where he was while Lazarus,  
    whom he loved,  
        sweated out his last few breaths on his death bed?

Jesus' actions seem to be a violation of basic human compassion,  
    not to mention a scorning of the basic practices of pastoral care.

Why in heaven's name, we ask, was Jesus late?

And that, it turns out, is precisely the question the author of John wants us to ask.

John knows that if we keep asking that question,  
    we will discover something profound about heaven's name,  
        about Jesus,  
            and about the ways of God in this world.

## III

On Sunday, July 17, 1966, arguably the most newsworthy worship service in the world that day was held in St. Peter's Cathedral in Geneva, Switzerland.

A great congregation, including Christian leaders from all over the globe, had gathered, and reporters from around the world were present to cover the event.

The service was part of the World Council of Churches Conference on Church and Society, and there was an air of expectation since the sermon was to be delivered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

But the great civil rights leader did not show up for the service.

The hymns were sung,  
the prayers were prayed,  
the ecumenical affirmations were spoken,  
but the pulpit was empty.

Dr. King was absent.

He had canceled his trip to Geneva because riots had broken out in Chicago, and his presence was needed there as a mediator.

He did send an audio tape of an excellent sermon to Geneva, and it was played over loud speakers at the appropriate time.

But, as one of the worshipers pointed out,

*"Even more powerful than his sermon that day was the simple fact of the preacher's absence."*

Sometimes Jesus saves us by being absent rather than present,  
at least not present in the ways we demand or expect.

Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he will soon depart from them.

*"You will look for me," he says, "... [but] where I am going, you cannot come" (John 13:33).*

This announcement that Jesus plans to leave the disciples causes fear, perhaps even panic.

They cannot imagine being apart from Jesus.

They plead that they will be lost without him (John 14:5),  
they beg to be allowed to follow him (John 13:37),  
but he refuses.

Jesus clearly intends to be their Lord by being absent from them.

Jesus will be obedient to God's will and not theirs.

Jesus will accomplish the saving work of God and not their small and provincial understanding of who he should be.

They want him to be the leader of their little band;  
Jesus is the Light of the entire world.

They want Jesus to teach them,  
guide them,  
heal them,  
protect them,  
and save them;  
Jesus teaches, guides, heals, protects, and saves all humanity.

They want him to respond to their immediate concerns,

but his mission is not captive to their sense of what is urgent.

He is their Lord because he transcends their little world.

He is their Lord because he is Lord of all.

#### IV

And on a deeper level, Jesus' mission transcends our puny definitions of urgency.

A man was dying.

More than that, it was Jesus' friend Lazarus who was dying.

Lazarus' body grows weak, hot with fever.

Mary and Martha wring their hands with worry.

The whole village of Bethany is troubled.

Naturally, from Bethany's perspective, this was the most urgent, important, life or death crisis in all of creation,

and Jesus should have dropped everything in the world to be there.

But Jesus will not drop the world;

he will save it,

all of it.

Jesus is not controlled by illness and death,

even his dear friend Lazarus' illness and death.

To the contrary, Jesus is the one in control.

Jesus does not jump when illness and death say "jump,"

he conquers illness and death for the entire human race.

Not only will Jesus not allow illness and death to set his agenda,  
neither will he allow death to be the ruler of time.

In the world as we know it, death is in charge of time.

When the hospital intercom crackles with the message "Code Blue,"  
a signal that a patient has gone into cardiac or respiratory arrest,  
all normal time ceases.

Physicians and nurses abruptly interrupt their customary duties and rush with  
emergency equipment to the afflicted patient.

(Chaplains do that too, by the way. When I did chaplaincy training at Indiana University  
Medical Center, the department's policy was that chaplains responded to all codes.)

Routines are halted; all other activities must wait.

Death has sounded the alarm and pushed the button on the stop watch,  
and all must urgently obey death's timetable.

### **But not Jesus!**

Jesus gets the "Code Blue" on Lazarus,  
receives word that the old clockwatching, slave-driver death has dialed 911,  
and his immediate presence is demanded.

But Jesus does not respond to death's timetable.

Jesus is Lord over death and Lord of all time.

No longer will death set the times and seasons,  
but only God.

So, Jesus takes his time, because it is, after all, his time.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath,  
just as he is the Lord over Monday,  
Tuesday,  
Wednesday,  
Thursday,  
Friday,  
and Sunday.

He is Lord over all the ticking minutes and desperate seasons of life.

He was there in the beginning,  
before all time,  
and through him all creation,  
including time,  
came into being.

## V

A couple gave their six-year-old son strict instructions to come home from playing every afternoon no later than 5 p.m. He was allowed to play with his friends, but his parents were quite serious about his curfew.

If he was not home by 5 p.m., they begin to worry and call around the neighborhood to find out where he was. The boy knew this, though, and was careful to arrive every day on time.

However, one Monday in March, the day after Daylight Saving Time went into effect, the boy was late coming home. When he finally arrived, a few minutes before 6 p.m., his mother scolded him for being late.

"You know you are to be home by five," she said, "and here it is nearly six."

Puzzled, the little boy pointed out the window.

"But the light," he protested, "the light; it's the light that tells me when to come home."

Realizing what had happened, his mother smiled and gently explained that the day before the time had changed,  
everyone had reset their clocks,  
and now the daylight lasted longer.

The boy's eyes narrowed as he asked suspiciously,  
*"Does God know about this?"*

In a childlike way, this little boy shared John's theological vision.

Time finally belongs not to human beings,  
not to the corruption of illness and death,  
but to God.

We know what time it is not by death's clock,  
but by Jesus' light.

Jesus will arrive in Bethany on his schedule,  
not death's.

It reminds me of a scene early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first of the trilogy of movies based on J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Frodo Baggins says to the wizard Gandalf, *"You're late."*

And Gandalf replies,

*“A wizard is never late, Frodo Baggins. Nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to.”*

The great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sang a song that went like this:

*You can't hurry my God, no no no,  
You just have to wait  
Trust him and give him time  
No matter how long it takes  
He's a God you just can't hurry  
He'll be there, don't you worry  
He may not come when you want him  
but he's right on time!*

Jesus will not come on dying Lazarus' time...

he will not come on Mary and Martha's time...

he will not come on the Bethany villagers' time...

he may not come in our moments of desperate time...

**but he will always, always come right on time.**

## VI

So when Jesus does arrive, he first comforts both Mary and Martha, reminding them that he is the ultimate power over death:

*“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)

Amidst all the grief and tears, the neighbors mumbled their own aside:

*"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"* (John 11:37).

*Could he not have come in time to prevent all this horrible heartache and pain?*

But Jesus doesn't answer their question.

Instead, in the shortest verse in the entire Bible, he reveals one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God:

*"Jesus wept"* (John 11:35).

The God whom we Christians worship is not some remote and aloof "sky god" somewhere way out there.

Rather, our God is a tender God,  
a loving God...  
a God who is deeply moved,  
even grieved,  
by anything and everything that threatens our human well-being.

But here is something else John wants us to know:  
God doesn't only empathize with our many pains and sorrows,  
God also acts.

Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus,  
now four days dead,  
and commands that the stone be moved from the entrance.

Then Jesus, the Lord of past, present, and future,  
reaches into the future of his resurrection victory  
reverses the past of Lazarus' death,  
and thereby displays the glory of God in the present.

**"Lazarus, come forth,"** he shouts.

And the whole world waits in breathless silence to see the dead man walking forth from the tomb.

"God so loved the world," John writes, "that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him" can change their clocks.

Instead of watching the clock, wondering when death will finally come calling to stop the hour hand from moving,

those who believe recognize that Jesus came calling with life eternal.

Everyone in the little village of Bethany thought Jesus was woefully late.

But when Lazarus came forth from the tomb of death,  
the light of eternity in his eyes,

the whole world could see that Jesus was right on time.

## VII

In a scene from the Eugene O'Neill play, *Lazarus Laughed*, Lazarus is facing Caligula, the Roman emperor,

a symbol of everything that is life-threatening in this life,  
a symbol of death.

Instead of groveling or begging for mercy, Lazarus laughs.

The chorus says, "*Laugh! Laugh! Fear is no more! Death is dead!*"

This is where the story of the raising of Lazarus points us: "Death is dead."

Take off your grave clothes.

Leave behind everything that binds you,  
everything that limits you,

everything that keeps you from being all that God created you to be.

Walk into the sunshine and live every single day of your life fully,  
with tears of gratitude, for the miracle of it, in your eyes.

Jesus came late,

but for you and me and every person who has faced the stark reality of death,

he came right on time.

Jesus is walking toward his death now—  
a final visit to the Holy City,  
a last supper,  
the cross looms.

But so does Easter and another empty tomb.

Jesus has already begun to do what he came to do;  
the light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it.

**Death is dead.**

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

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