
Waiting for God

John 11:1-45

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 6, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. William Willimon

Anybody still standing who worked with me at Duke Chapel (and there are only a few) will tell you: I'm not a patient person. (Though there were moments when Dr. Wynkoop's temperament made me look serene.)

Today's gospel -- dead Lazarus raised by shouting Jesus -- has an odd detail for the impatient among us. Jesus is summoned by his buddies, Mary and Martha, to the bedside of their brother, Lazarus.

"Come quickly!" begs Martha, "Lazarus whom you love is ill." Jesus' response to Martha's plea for emergency medical assistance?

"Aw, Lazarus isn't terminal."

How does Jesus know, with no exam, that Lazarus isn't so sick? Three days later, when Jesus finally makes it to Mary and Martha's, Martha gives Jesus a piece of her mind.

"Don't rush right over Mr. Savior. It's too late for Lazarus. He's been entombed for three days," and, as she says it in the elegant King James' Version, "already he stinketh."

So Jesus wasn't a great diagnostician.

And thus my eye fell upon a weird detail in a weird story in this weirdest of gospels. When Jesus is beseeched by Mary and Martha to rush over and heal his good friend Lazarus, John says, "Jesus waited two days."

Excuse me? Why didn't Mr. Compassion rush right over and save these sisters, and their brother, this grief? Isn't that your definition of friendship: a friend is someone who cares enough to drop everything and come when you call? What was Jesus doing that was more important than aiding a friend in dire need? Was Jesus in the middle of a sermon series and just couldn't break away? Had Jesus a thousand sick people triaged ahead of Lazarus? John just says "Jesus waited two days."

Am I the only impatient person who finds this three day lacuna, this insensitive seventy-two hour hiatus, odd? When I go to Duke's Dr. Jim Kelly for immortality therapy, a waiting room sign says if he doesn't call for me in fifteen minutes I'm to complain to President Broadhead. It takes Jesus three days to get to Lazarus?

True, when Jesus finally stops whatever he's doing (though whatever it is isn't significant enough for John to mention it!) and gets to the cemetery Jesus pulls off a spectacular resuscitation. At Jesus' cry, "Lazarus arise! Unbind him! Let him go!" Lazarus strides forth from the tomb! Impressive. All's well that ends well, you say.

But still, a three day delay?

Church fathers speculated that this raising of Lazarus is a prefigurement of Jesus' resurrection. As dead Jesus lay in the tomb for three days, so Lazarus. OK.

So...why did Jesus wait three days in the tomb before his resurrection? What was Jesus doing those three days? The Book of First Peter claims that dead Jesus went to Hades and preached to those who hadn't the chance to hear him in life. Odd. Still that's more explanation than John gives for Jesus' delay in aiding Lazarus.

A three-day delay in a matter of life and death? Why did Jesus make us wait from Good Friday to Easter for his resurrection?

"He's back!" cried the women who ran from Jesus' tomb on Easter.

"Where has he been since Friday?" asks the church.

Maybe it takes an impatient person like me to settle on this detail in the raising of Lazarus. Why did Jesus delay?

In my first congregation, old folks sometimes said, “God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.” If that’s true, why a three day wait to do good?

I believe not only that God is love, but also that God is love pro nobis, for us. I believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. But why the wait? Why these empty spaces, this wasted time, hopeless despair, unanswered questions, and delayed salvation if God is God for us? What good God’s goodness if it is goodness postponed?

I remember the day that it occurred to me: From the time the Hebrews went into slavery, to the day God delivered them was about four hundred years.

Exodus begins with God showing up to Moses in the burning bush, “I am the God of your forefathers. I have heard the cry of my people. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh.” And though it is not found in your Bibles, Moses responded, “It’s about time! We’ve been slaves for four hundred years. Don’t rush right over!”

I know someone who has prayed to God every day for deliverance from the relentlessly painful arthritis that has plagued her since youth. And for six decades she has prayed to God for rescue from this hell and she has....heard nothing from God.

Stanley Hauerwas says that Israel’s faith was “long training in being out of control” of its relationship with God, without despising God.

That’s not a bad definition of the training required for a faithful Christian life – learning the patience to live our lives out of control, vulnerable to the comings, goings, and tardiness of a living God.

In my attempt to be bishop, my former flock in Alabama would tell you this was the major weakness of my leadership: I found it hard to wait for God.

I so wanted our efforts at church renewal to bear fruit. Now. I prayed for every pastor to be renewed in ministry. Now. I only had eight years as bishop. I couldn’t wait for God to show up!

“It took the Lord four hundred years between God’s last words of the Old Testament and God’s first words of the New,” they said, “we can wait eight years for you to leave Alabama.”

Looking back, though I fancied myself as a decisive, timely leader, I made mistakes by rushing things, taking matters into my own hands, moving too quickly, not allowing a crisis to mature and ripen.

Grace is not grace (the word means “gift”) if it’s predictable, programmable, on demand.

Maybe that’s why God sometimes takes God’s own good time to show up, to reach out, to move, and to save.

“Sadly, my son, who grew up attending Duke Chapel, is not a Christian now,” a mother said to me.

And I, having gained a healthy respect for God taking God’s own good time replied, “Not a Christian yet, you should say. God’s got ways of getting what God wants, but God takes God’s own time. You tell your son to keep looking over his shoulder as he moves into his forties.”

It took God thirty years to convince me that the Doctrine of the Trinity made sense. I’m glad that God finally got around to giving me the grace to believe in so rich a notion, though it would have been nice if God had given me that in time for my doctrinal exams back in seminary.

The Thessalonians asked Paul, “When is Jesus returning? We’re worn out with waiting.”

“Oh with the eternal Lord, a thousand years are like one day,” Paul replied.

Nice try, Paul.

A cardinal Christian virtue is therefore patience: the virtue of allowing God to be God in God’s own good time. Our lives are not under our sole control. We live on God’s time, not ours.

It’s conventional for Christians to say, at time of death, “I believe that my loved one is now in heaven with God.” And perhaps that’s the case.

Orthodox Christian belief has more typically said that when we die, we wait. The dead await the last trumpet, the general resurrection of the dead. In death, even as in life, we wait, utterly dependent upon God to show up, to raise the dead, and to make our lives mean what they could not mean on our own. I believe that even in death we shall have a future, but our future, being totally in God's hands, will be, as our present, in God's own good time.

A frequently asked question, when I exited as bishop was, "What do you think will be your legacy?"

I responded, "God only knows." I meant it. It's up to God to make our lives mean something beyond our time. As the previous Pope put it, "Only God has a future." Our sole hope is that the God who raised Lazarus, albeit three days after his death, shall raise us. Our "legacy" is up to God.

Maybe we are made to wait in order to purge us of our urge to make our lives turn out on our own, to be cured of ungodly impatience, to let God be God in time. Maybe we must wait because what God is up to is more than the righting of a few injustices, the soothing of some pain. If it's a new heaven and a new earth, creation brought to completion, total renovation, it may take a while.

I got sick. I was sure it was the dreaded swine flu, or bird flu, or some other beastial pestilence. Jim Kelly diagnosed it as "whatever is going around." It dragged on a week, then a month, two months. I was miserable. I had traveling to do, important things that can't be done while you are coughing up your guts and your nose is running.

When I was free of fever and finally on the mend, I was complaining to a friend about my suffering. He asked, "What did your illness try to teach you?"

What? I'm supposed to be a student of sickness? I'm meant to grow in my relationship to God even during illness? You're not saying that God took two months to cure just to teach me about my finitude and my morality, are you?

One day, someday, we shall know. Jesus is God With Us, though maybe not as soon as we'd like.