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John 11:1-16

Thirty-second Message

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DELAY THAT LEADS TO DEATH

Author Leslie Silko writes, “You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories.”¹ We come now to an amazing story in chapter 11 of John’s gospel, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This, the last of seven signs recorded by John, is the climactic sign of this gospel.

The seven signs are as follows:

1. Water into wine (2:1-11)
2. Raising official’s son (4:46-54)
3. Healing of the lame man (5:1-18)
4. Feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-14)
5. Calming the storm (6:15-21)
6. Healing the blind man (9:1-41)
7. Raising of Lazarus (11:1-44)

Lazarus is not the only person Jesus raised from the dead; there is Jairus’s daughter in Mark 4, and the widow’s son in Luke 7. But the Lazarus story in John is much more detailed and familiar.

Up until now we have seen that Jesus is the bread of life, the water of life, and the light of life, but now Jesus gives life itself. Since there is so much in this story we are going to take it in two weeks.

First, a few comments about the structure of this gospel. Chapters 11 and 12 are a bridge between the first half of the gospel, the book of signs, and the second half, the book of glory. It’s obvious that chapter 11 helps to conclude the first half. It marks the end of Jesus’ public ministry and records the last of seven signs. The raising of Lazarus takes place just after the discourse of the Good Shepherd, and just prior to the Passion Week, when Jesus risks his life by going back to Judea. So the story illustrates what the Good Shepherd does – he lays down his life for the flock. When Jesus speaks to the dead and the dead come out of the tomb, he seals his own fate

But chapter 11 also introduces the second half of the book. As we saw last week, chapter 10 ends with Jesus escaping arrest and heading to Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing: “And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. Many came to Him and were saying, ‘While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true.’ Many believed in Him there” (10:40-42).

This mention of John and Bethany beyond the Jordan marks a connection to chapter 1, the first story after the prologue,

which contains the questioning of John by religious experts from Jerusalem: “These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing” (1:28).

This story has come full circle. The mention of the Bethany beyond the Jordan highlights a giant *inclusio* in John’s gospel and might indicate a major break.

Chapter 11 begins with a story that foreshadows Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.” But when Jesus heard this, He said, “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was. (11:1-6 NASB)

The opening six verses provide with the setting of the story. Notice several details. The casual introduction of Lazarus indicates that John’s readers were familiar with Lazarus. Some think the story is a retelling of a parable in Luke 16 about a man named Lazarus. But there is no reason not to think these accounts are separate.

Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, lived in Bethany. This Bethany and the Bethany beyond the Jordan are different villages. This is why John characterizes it as “the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” The village lies on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem, along the road to Jericho. Bethany beyond the Jordan is in the region of Batanea, east of the Sea of Galilee, some 150 kilometers from where Lazarus lived. The river in which John was baptizing was most likely the Yarmuk. To understand the story it’s important to know this distinction of place.

The Mount of Olives offers an wonderful view of Jerusalem. Today, tourists rise early to watch the sun rise over the city. The mount is covered with tombs because, according to the prophet Zechariah, that where the resurrection will take place. Ironically, with the raising of Lazarus, Jesus is already ushering in the new age.

Mary is the one who poured perfume on the Lord. This looks forward to the events at the beginning of chapter 12, and presupposes that John thinks his readers have already heard of

it. It is not unrealistic that John should introduce a figure who is explained more thoroughly in a subsequent passage.

Lazarus is very sick, so his concerned sisters send a message to Jesus about their brother. They address Jesus as “Lord,” their master. They are disciples, but they are not making a confession of his deity.

Lazarus is described in verse 3 as “the one whom Jesus loved.” John adds that Jesus loved not only Lazarus, but also Martha and her sister (verse 5). The fact that Mary’s name is omitted may indicate that Martha was the older of the two. Because of his love for this family, Jesus will return to Jerusalem, but this is also a signal from the Father. Two different words for love are used, *phileo* in verse 3 and *agapao* in verse 5, but there seems to be no discernible shift in meaning. John does this sort of thing throughout his gospel.

This beautiful note reveals the humanity of Jesus. The Lord had emotions and affections for certain people. Later in the story we learn that he wept. Jesus was not some unfeeling, insensitive divine robot or theological machine. He cared for and loved people. He hurt when others hurt. Human suffering affected him. At the cross he experienced the pain and anguish of a human being. This insight from John helps us to know Jesus and to relate to him in a much more real way.

Receiving the message about Lazarus, Jesus proclaims that the sickness is not to death. This does not mean it is not fatal, but that it will not ultimately end in death. Rather, the sickness is for the glory of God. This compares to what Jesus said about the blind man in 9:3: “*It was* neither *that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Jesus knows that the purpose behind what will soon take place is so that God’s glory can be revealed. Glory in this gospel is connected to God’s self-disclosure (1:14), the manifestation of his character, grace and truth. Jesus also understands that the Son of God is to be glorified. The raising of Lazarus provides an opportunity for God, in revealing his glory, to glorify his Son. Father and Son are mutually committed to each other’s glory.

Then after this He said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” (11:7-10)

After a couple of days, Jesus tells his disciples that they are going back to Judea. Chapter 10 ends with the Jews seeking to stone Jesus during the Feast of Dedication. The disciples cannot believe he would go back to Judea. They fear the threat of the Jews. But then they don’t recognize that Jesus’ death will be his glorification and the consummation of his ministry.

Jesus responds by talking about day and night. This connects to 9:4, where he did the same. Typically there were 12 hours of daylight, plus or minus, depending on the time of year. People worked during the day. The sun, the light of the world, determines when the work day begins and ends. During daylight one can see and work and not stumble.

Jesus is telling his disciples that it is still day and he must continue to do the works of the Father while it is still day. Night is coming and the period of daylight will end. But even if the daylight is advanced, it would be wrong to quit before the twelve hours are used up. Jesus is safe so long as it is day and so long as he is doing the Father’s will.

Jesus is also the light of the world. As long as the disciples have him they should do the works assigned to them. This applies to us as well. If we walk in the light, walk in the way of Jesus, walk in his presence, we have nothing to fear. Fear comes by walking in darkness; then we are sure to stumble. As long as we walk in the light of Jesus we will be all right. Our times are in God’s hands.

Next, Jesus informs his disciples that Lazarus has died.

This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” (11:11)

Notice that Jesus says, “our” friend, but that “I go.” Jesus alone is the resurrection and the life.

The disciples then said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.” Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.” (11:12-16)

The disciples don’t understand Jesus’ metaphorical use of the word sleep. Their minds are on the illness, and they do not want to return to Judea. They think Lazarus will recover, i.e., be saved, healed. The word for “fallen asleep” in verse 13 is used only here in the New Testament, but it is a common expression in the Old Testament referring to death – “so and so slept with his fathers.”

Thomas responds with wild boldness, saying that he is willing to go and die with Jesus. In chapter 20, Thomas is labeled as the doubter, but here he shows devotion and courage, even if it is blind courage. Obviously, he speaks better than he knows, because to follow Jesus means death, laying down our life. We will die, but we will also live with him.

What is striking about the first part of the story is Jesus’ delay in going to his friend. Why did he delay? Verse 6 says he stays two days longer in Bethany beyond the Jordan after he hears the news. Verse 17 will inform us that by the time he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus will have been four days in the tomb. The distance Jesus must travel is about 150 kilometers,

a journey of almost four days. The likely scenario is that after Jesus hears the news, he delays two days until Lazarus has died – information which he knows supernaturally. At that point he travels to Lazarus' home. Upon his arrival, Lazarus has been dead for four days. So even if Jesus had left immediately, Lazarus probably would have been dead for two days before the Lord got there.

But even if Jesus could not have gotten to Bethany in time, he loved Lazarus and could have spoken a word to heal him, like he did for the official's son in chapter 4. Both Martha and Mary have the perspective that Jesus could have prevented this death. They both say the same thing to Jesus when they see him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (21, 32).

Why didn't Jesus come immediately? The rabbis believed that the soul hovers over the body of the deceased for the first three days, intending to re-enter it. After three days, death was considered irreversible. When Jesus raised Lazarus there could be no mistaking the resurrection as resuscitation.

But there is much more here that has enormous spiritual significance for our lives.

1. God often delays or allows circumstances to occur so that we experience the effects of loss and death.

Sometimes we ask for healing but it is not granted. At times we ask and God delays. We know that God could heal with a word, but he doesn't. We know that God could prevent death, but he doesn't. God delays. This is a difficult truth to grasp, but it is true nonetheless.

This is confirmed by many stories in the Bible. Abraham and Sara waited for God's promise of a child; Joseph waited for redemption in Egypt; Israel waited in Egyptian bondage or Babylonian exile. The Bible makes clear that God is never in a hurry to prevent unpleasant circumstances.

This truth is also confirmed by our own lives. We can point to times when God did not prevent death in one way or another. Our understanding of God has to be large enough to include death, the laying down of our life. Death is a necessary condition for true life. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12:24).

Death occurs in different ways, at different times. There are obvious physical and definable ways in which death comes, but so much really takes place within us. I characterize this inner journey, this downward way of the cross, as a slow burn. It can happen when we are 25, 35, 50 or 70. We die to a life we wanted or the way we think life should be. We die to our desire for a perfect body, a cavity-free mouth, a big house or a fancy vacation. We die to our need for a spouse or a child. We die to our deepest longing for reciprocated love from the one who is most important to us. There are so many ways that life forces us to lay down our life – and God doesn't prevent it.

2. There are a variety of responses and a multitude of emotions to death or the laying down of our life.

When death occurs, we experience fear and anxiety, confusion and doubt. We get angry with God for not preventing it or not responding to our prayers. Some people experience numbness, darkness and depression. Others fill their lives with activity so they don't have to face reality. Each one of us has a different set of emotions and each responds in a different way.

But all of us have real emotions which we need to face openly and honestly. God uses our emotions to stir our deepest longings for love, acceptance and a place to belong. The worst thing we can do is to deny them, suppress them or paint death with some glossy, out-of-touch Christian slogan. God uses our emotions to reach the deepest place in our hearts with his grace and love.

3. God's delays do not mean that he does not love us, but that he has higher purposes for our lives.

The text is very clear to point out that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. It is so clear that John uses both the word *phileo* and *agapao* to describe that comprehensive love. Jesus' delay is ultimately for the good of Lazarus, his sisters, his disciples and the people who come from Jerusalem to be witnesses. The delay is tied to believing. Jesus tells the disciples that he rejoices because they will believe.

Jesus is not indifferent in the face of human suffering. He too suffers. But God's will and God's purposes take a higher priority than our happiness. God in his wisdom will do what will result in his glory, and he rejoices in it. In the end he will be glorified and it will be for our good. God is so much for us that he will delay and endure our dying to self so that we can experience something so much better – resurrected life, a life that we can never have without God or without death. If God loved us while we were enemies and sinners, how much more will he love us through our suffering and trials?

Can we accept the fact that God uses the events of our life so that we will live a believing life, a resurrected life? Can we accept the fact that God delays in order to reveal his glory for the good of others? The events in your life might be for the benefit of another person as he or she sees the glory of God revealed in your circumstances. Can we accept the fact that God wants to use our life for a higher goal and purpose than our personal happiness? Are we willing to believe? The community that believes in these higher purposes and goals is one that will be transformed by the light of Jesus into the glory of God.

4. While we wait for God's arrival, we can do so with the hope and confidence of his commitment and love and purposes towards us.

Frederick Buechner writes: "Faith cannot be sure of things happening the way it wants because it is God who makes things happen the way God wants. Faith can only wait in hope and trust. Sometimes God makes himself known by his presence,

sometimes by his absence...”² And this from Henri Nouwen: “The root choice is to trust at all times that God is with you and will give you what you most need.”³

As we wait for God to fulfill his plans, one choice before us is to live life complaining, arguing, fighting, fearing, and trying to force life in our own strength and understanding. These are signs of not trusting and not believing. I recognize those signs in my life all too well. The other choice is to wait patiently, to hope fervently and love compassionately. These are signs of believing.

The Scriptures are full of encouragements to sustain us when fear and darkness creep into our hearts. I will quote but a few:

**This I recall to my mind,
Therefore I have hope.
The LORD’S lovingkindness indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness (Lam 3:21-23).**

**For the Lord will not reject forever,
For if He causes grief,
Then He will have compassion
According to His abundant lovingkindness. (Lam 3:31-32)**

**I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would
see the goodness of the LORD
In the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
Be strong and let your heart take courage;
Yes, wait for the LORD. (Psa 27:13-14)**

**I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait,
And in His word do I hope.
My soul waits for the Lord
More than the watchmen for the morning;
Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD;
For with the LORD there is lovingkindness,
And with Him is abundant redemption.
And He will redeem Israel
From all his iniquities. (Psa 130:5-8)**

Waiting on the Lord is hard, but it is necessary if we truly desire resurrection life. This is what we believe – that in all our failure and frailty, weakness and wickedness, God gives life.

¹ Charlie Peacock, *New Way to Be Human* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004), xv.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 1974, 2005), 63.

³ Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 113.