

Sermon – An Untimely Death That is Not What it Seems

Scripture: John 11: 1-16

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Alex staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The plaque was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside him and said quietly, “Good morning, Alex.”

“Good morning, Pastor,” replied the young man, still focused on the plaque. “Pastor McGhee, what is this?” Alex asked.

“Well, son, it’s a memorial to all the men and women who have died in the service.”

Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Little Alex’s voice was barely audible when he finally managed to ask, “Which one, the 9:00 or 10:30 service?”

Well, God willing nobody is going to die at this service.... But today we are going to talk about an untimely death. The death in fact of someone who was very close to Jesus, his friend Lazarus. You see when Jesus came into the world his purpose was two fold. One purpose was to participate fully in the human condition. The second one was to give human beings a window into who God is and how he operates in our world. The resurrection of Lazarus is an incredible example of this two fold activity of Jesus. And to really understand what we are going to go for a deep dive into both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus separately.

As Lazarus’ sisters realize that their brother is very serious, they send an SOS call to Jesus. “Lord come quick, because the one you love is very sick”. But Jesus hearing this

distress call decides to wait for two whole days before he does anything. He gives this messengers a very cryptic reply. He tells them, “don’t worry Lazarus is not going to die but that this whole event is so that God is going to be glorified”. You have to picture the scene. Firstly, the fact that Jesus is telling them that Lazarus is not going to die is pretty troubling right, because nobody actually told him Lazarus was going to die in the first place! So when you tell people, don’t worry he is not going to die, it actually has the reverse effect on everybody. Now they are all thinking, OMG Lazarus is going to die! Kind of like when you tell someone “don’t worry” now they start worrying all the more. I don’t know if you have that experience. See in this case those around him are thinking, why is he bringing death into the picture? Is it because he knows something that others don’t know? And the next part of it is even more cryptic because Jesus tells them, this is happening “for the glory of God. And you know how God is going to be glorified, you see God is going to get glorified because the Son of Man is going to get glory from this”. Now do you see Jesus’ divinity operating? It is not humanly possible for people to come to these conclusions from what they heard right? Someone comes and tells you, “so and so is really sick”, now you would not respond, “oh this is great because now God is really going to be glorified!” Lazarus’s sickness and God’s glory don’t just connect by themselves in the human mind. And they are not expected to. But Jesus Christ knew that in the end, when the story of Lazarus has fully played out, then they would understand that Lazarus’ illness had a divine purpose and part of that divine purpose was for people to recognize his true identity as the Son of God.

There is another aspect of this interaction that we need to look at here. Verse 5 takes great care to point out that Jesus loved these three people who were each suffering in different ways. Jesus cared about their suffering and knew very well what they were going through. And the drama of the situation is not lost on Jesus. Even as Jesus decides to wait for two days, because of his divinity he knows more about the state of their state of mind than anyone else. The sisters had every reason to expect Jesus to show up

and when he does not, he can see them getting more and more desperate. And when Lazarus dies, Jesus can feel their grief. You see Lazarus was not an old man. This is why I have called this an untimely death. In any culture when terrible things happen to people the tendency is to think that those bad things are happening because they did something wrong. Sometime bad things happen because of sin, sure. But sometimes there is no easy explanation. But verse 5 wants you to know that not only was there a special purpose in Lazarus' suffering but that there should be no doubt about Jesus' love for the whole family. He cared deeply for Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

Now I want to ask you, do you know of a situation in your life where you prayed for God to do something and you prayed and prayed. And you knew that it was something that was very unselfish and something that God clearly would have wanted too and you pray and you wait and nothing happens! I am sure everyone of you has had that experience. You wonder when Jesus is going to show up. And in the mean time your mess just gets worse! Well, this is part of the human condition my friends. The human condition is best summarized as, our timetable is not God's timetable and our purposes are not God's purposes. And the sooner we can recognize that and live with it the better. And Mary and Martha come to recognize that eventually. And while you are waiting for God to act, know that He loves you tremendously and he is going to be glorified through whatever you are going through. **God does not act according to human timetables**, but be sure of God's love for you while you wait.

Now when Jesus says, "lets go back to Judea", no opposition force is going to stop him. You see when two days had ended, Jesus announces to his disciples that it was time to go back to Bethany in Judea. Now in the text you would have noticed that, Jesus' disciples are terrified of the idea. Why? Because just a few days ago, they were in Judea

where all the big wigs are. And it is there that Jesus had made the clearest declaration that he was the Son of God. When he said that the people were so appalled that they accuse him of blasphemy and were about to stone him to death. Now Jesus and his disciples have just managed to escape to a safer location. So a few days later when Jesus gets a call to go back to the hot spot, none of the disciples are thrilled at the idea. So they turn to Jesus and ask him, "Why would you want to go back there Jesus?" To that Jesus gives one of his mysterious replies *"There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. ¹⁰But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light."* ¹¹Then he said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up."

You see what Jesus meant was this. "I have a job to do, and every job has an appropriate time to do it, and the appropriate time for me to do this job is now. That is why we have to go to Bethany now", Jesus tells his disciples. You see when Jesus first received the SOS, it was not the right time to go from God's 20,000 feet perspective of the situation. Now when Jesus is ready to go, from a human perspective it does not seem to be a good time for Jesus to go. After all they could all be stoned to death. But nobody can stop Jesus. And here is what Jesus is communicating about God by going to Bethany at that time. When it is time for God to act, God will act no matter what it costs him. When God acts, the timing is purely dictated by the Father. Nothing else. When God says, it is time to go, its time to go. And no hurdle or circumstance that will stop God from doing what he needs to do.

As you know the next part of this story is that, by the time Jesus arrives in Bethany Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. But before he

does anything he simply waits with Mary and Martha and weeps with them. Gone is the divine 20,000 feet perspective of the situation. Gone in the foreknowledge of what he is going to do and all the glory God is going to get from this whole incident. At that point Jesus is someone who says, death is horrible. Your grief is heavy and don't think for a moment that when you suffer I don't suffer as well. This is as painful for me as it is for you. When Jesus first approaches the family, the first thing he demonstrates is his empathy and humanity.

Jesus there is more to Jesus than his humanity. So the next thing he does is calls out in a loud voice for Lazarus to come out. At that moment, in the flash of an eye, everything changes. The dead and decomposing body of Lazarus, comes back to life. You see the depth of the hopelessness of Lazarus' situation becomes the height of the glory of God that day. The intensity of the despair of the family was converted into the intensity of astonishment. Jesus was demonstrating his greatest super power to the world. The power to convert death to life. And this act of the raising of Lazarus was the preparation of his own death and resurrection that was to follow soon. You see Jesus was saying to the world not only that he is God but as God, his message to the world was, the hopelessness of your circumstances is no hindrance for Him. In fact the more hopeless your situation is, the more God is glorified when the transformation happens.

What He expects of us in the interim is to wait. And while you wait, be reassured of His love. Know that he feels every aspect of your pain. But he is the God of the Resurrection. He came to earth to tell you that

He brings life to the dead. And he is not done doing these transformations. Let us pray.