

Sermon Notes for 11/1/15 (All Saints Day)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: John 11:32-44

Theme: HOW GOD’S DELAYS WORK FOR US

The Point: God’s actions prove to be for the good of His people, even when they seem to be delayed “unnecessarily.”

Introduction: We live in an instant society. We have instant cameras, instant pudding, instant potatoes, instant credit, instant oatmeal. We despise three-second delays in looking up our searches through millions of documents on Google. We want medications that give us instant relief. Video services give us instant access to thousands of TV shows and live coverage of nearly any sports event imaginable. And yet we are constantly living with delays, aren’t we? We stand in slow lines to get our fast food. We wait to see the doctor, sometimes for extended periods of time. We want other people to respond more quickly to those things that we have identified as time-critical from our vantage point. And delays can make us irritable, frustrated, discouraged, and even angry, sometimes even angry at God.

We seem to have a natural inclination to blame God for the bad things that happen in our lives, especially those that (we think) result from delays in His actions. Mary’s words (which only echo Martha’s words from earlier in this chapter) indicate that the sisters would have probably comforted one another and their brother early on in the course of his illness with assurances like, “Surely Jesus will come soon, and He will heal Lazarus. Just hang on a little longer, little brother.” And when Jesus DIDN’T show up “in time” (according to their ideas of timeliness), they were ready to blame Him. Implied in their words is this: “Jesus, you should have come sooner. You could have done something if you had been here before death took Lazarus out. Now, of course, it is too late. All we can do is weep and mourn. Your timing stinks!”

The testimony of these women also “bled over” into that of the assembled multitude, most of whom are doubtless friends and neighbors of Mary and Martha, come to comfort them in their brother’s death. After Jesus arrived, some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” They too wanted to prescribe to Jesus the way He should act. He should have healed this man, especially someone who was so close to Him, a good friend, a willing supporter, a hospitable partner in mission. Why in the world hadn’t Jesus come sooner? Why hadn’t He left for Bethany immediately after He got the news of Lazarus’ sickness? He had delayed two days for some reason – and, of course, by the time He arrived in Bethany, it was four days too late!

Martha’s reaction to Jesus’ command to remove the stone runs (at first) along the same lines. Her protest seems to be perfectly natural: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” The theme is consistent through the narrative: “TOO LATE! Jesus, you have blown it. If only you had acted in the way we had expected and wanted, then things would be fine. But now – well, it’s just TOO LATE!”

Have you ever judged God of being “guilty” of delaying actions in your life? Maybe you have been praying for a long time for guidance and direction about a particular action or decision – but still don’t believe you are at a point of resolution. As a child, did you want God to bring a change to something that Mom or Dad were doing that was hurtful – but the same routines seemed to go on and on? Did you move to a new home and want to make friends – but it seemed that desire was constantly being postponed or hijacked? Perhaps you wanted a child – but no child came. Maybe the grief that you experienced after the death of a loved one – spouse, child, friend – just seems to be a preoccupation, even though you would like to “get over it.” In these and many other situations, it just seems so natural to think, “God, if You were really around – and really interested in me – You would do something about this. Get in motion, God, and prove Yourself to me.”

Was that four-day period of Lazarus being in the grave enough of a delay for the greatness of Jesus' miracle to penetrate the hearts of those who were present to hear Him say, "Lazarus, come out!"? We should have learned by now in our lives (at least, for most of us) that delay is not necessarily a bad thing. You might have wanted to drive that car when you were 12 or 13 – but now you realize that 16 might even be too early for some of these young people, right? Christmas does come around again – even though right about now those little guys are wondering just how long two months can be – and the waiting is part of the fun for you, isn't it? Maybe you wanted that promotion years earlier – but now you realize that the experiences you went through in the meantime equipped you to be a much better contributor when it did come along.

You see, this account of Lazarus' resurrection is not just about putting a family together. It is a call to each one of us to trust in the Savior who demonstrates His power over death and the grave. And faith is always a matter of living by hope and trust in things that we do not yet see. Jesus said to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Living by faith calls us to trust that God is acting for our good, even when we do not perceive how that could possibly be the case.

God's delays are always well-timed. Don't you imagine that Mary and Martha felt just a little bit foolish for complaining to Jesus about His being "late," after they had the chance to hug and kiss their dead brother who was now alive again? Don't you imagine that they learned something important about the need to wait patiently and hopefully on the Lord and His promises?

God told Noah 120 years before the flood began that it was coming. Imagine all the years that Noah's friends and neighbors mocked his words. God's delays allowed the ark to be completed and the word to be proclaimed until the time was right. While Israel was waiting for the promise of Messiah to be fulfilled, hundreds and hundreds of years went by. "How long, O Lord?" was their consistent cry and prayer. But God's delays were well-timed, and when the time was just right, God sent His Son to be born of a woman to redeem all of us who are under the law's curse.

As we look around in this world, we see a lot of heartache, a lot of suffering, a lot of grief and anguish. We would wish for the final announcement to come soon, "See, I am making all things new." But in a sense this has already taken place. When Jesus shouted from the cross, "It is finished," He meant that the whole process of our salvation had been completed. We are just awaiting the final icing to be put onto the cake, the return of our Lord in power and glory and judgment. On that day, Scripture promises, it will be dinner time, big-time! "The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And [one more thing God Himself will do, as His hunger will move into action] he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken."

Death will be no more – and when it goes, so does the whole panoply of thugs that accompany it – mourning, tears, pain, persecution, trials, grief, sorrow, distress. All of them will be wiped out of existence, and the new heaven and new earth will be established. As John wrote in the Revelation, "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Isaiah talks about a shroud. The shroud is a piece of cloth, sometimes ornate, often much simpler, which is used to wrap a dead body for burial. As he emerged from the grave, Lazarus had no more need of a shroud. Jesus had to instruct the people to unbind him, to loose him from that burial shroud, so that he could live and walk freely once again.

On that final day, God will finally devour the shroud over all peoples. He will swallow up death forever. Death goes out of business that day! What a day that will be! Will you wait for it? Will you live patiently, even if the Lord seems to delay His return for another generation or another century or another millennium? For this earth must stand until the banquet table in eternity is full. “It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Salvation is worth waiting for. Whether we find ourselves in painful trials or multiplying troubles or devastating grief, we still have reason to rejoice. Our Lord is still on His throne, and He has done everything needed to save us. His delays are well-timed and always for our good. That is the Good News for today! Death gone! Life springs anew! Jesus lives! And so do all of us who live in Him! Wait for Him, and know that you will live in Him forever.

One other thing that I believe we need to learn from this text. John is writing some 60 or 70 years after the events portrayed here. If that had been you writing, don't you think you would want to include something about what Lazarus had to say about his four days in the grave – or what he experienced on the other side of death? But the Spirit did not instruct John to leave us with such testimony. He focused on what we need to know, and that is the word of Jesus. The word and promise of our Lord is what we need to rest on and live in, not the reports of somebody who supposedly walked into the heavenly light for a while before being so rudely jerked back into his body. The pictures of heaven that we find in Scripture are a lot more instructive about what is NOT there, not so much about what IS there. We know God is there, and the angels and His people from every tongue and language and nation. And we know that death and mourning and tears and pain are gone forever. Beyond that, we simply live by the word and promise of our Lord.

Conclusion: So we find that God's actions prove to be for the good of His people, even when they seem to be delayed “unnecessarily.” God's delays are always intended to strengthen us, not to tear us down (or to tear us apart). God sees the big picture. He has the long view, a view that includes our final destination and resurrection. Any delays here on earth, even delays of centuries or millennia, will seem to be miniscule compared with the eternity of joy and bliss that awaits us in the Savior's presence. So let's not insist on being an instant church or an instant disciple. Rather, we can wait on the Lord, renew our strength as we feed on His Word and His meal, and move forward in service and ministry as He empowers us. In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!