

Sermon- When God Does Not Show Up

Scripture: John 11:1-6

Sunday, February 3, 2019

In our journey through the Gospel of John we are in an interesting place. When you look at the format of the Gospel of John, scholars have noticed many patterns in the way the material is organized. This is important because the sequencing of the material is not random or even chronological. The placing of the stories themselves are telling a story. Once you go past the introduction, chapter 2 to 4 is known as the “Cana cycle”. Because it starts with the wedding miracle in Cana in Galilee and ends with the healing of the official’s son in Galilee as well. Whenever Jesus performs his miracles in Galilee people believe him. In the middle of the Cana cycle when Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the festivals, he sees opposition. In Cana he starts his ministry with healing. In Jerusalem he starts his ministry with temple cleansing. In Cana he is believed. In Jerusalem he is opposed. So the Cana cycle introduces the opposition to Jesus. And immediately after that the Gospel focuses even more on this opposition in the next pattern scholars call the Festival cycle, starting from the healing of the lame man at the pool of Shiloh, chapter 5 all the way to the end of chapter 11, the chapter that we are starting today, the raising of Lazarus.

Now in the festival cycle itself, the pattern you will see is that Jesus in Jerusalem for a particular festival, he performs some important healing or sign miracle, follows it with an important I AM saying, he then interprets the sign and that raises significant conflict with the Pharisees. And the message of the Festival cycle is that Jerusalem was Jesus’ true home, but it is here that he faced more hardness of heart than all the hardness of the grand stone structures put together. So pay attention to this theme in the Festival cycle because we are nearing the climactic end of this cycle. In chapter 11 Jesus blends teaching, interpretation and performing the miraculous sign in the first half of the

chapter. But his biggest sign yet, also gave rise to his biggest opposition yet. And that is what the second half of Chapter 11 will deal with.

But today we will be in the very beginning of chapter 11. In fact we will be looking at the first 6 verses. This is where the story, the main characters, and place is introduced. This is where the first act sets up the action to follow. This is where Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to follow. Because for Jesus his miracles were signs and a sign is only effective if the people understood its meaning. And it would be his disciples who would be doing the explaining in times to come. So like in all his previous signs, Jesus takes time to explain carefully the meaning of what he does to his disciples. So let's go to the opening scene and get oriented ourselves with the greatest of Jesus' miraculous signs the Raising of Lazarus.

The first thing we see in the opening verse is that all the characters in the narrative are introduced. This is the story in the life of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, close family friends of Jesus. This family hosted Jesus and his companions often. The name Lazarus is also interesting because it is the shortened form of the Hebrew name Eleazer which means "God assists". A very apt name for both this Lazarus and the Lazarus in Luke 16, the parable of the Beggar and the Rich man. Also speaking of the meaning of names, this family lived in Bethany. In Hebrew it means House of Suffering. Now Bethany was just 2 miles South East of Jerusalem. That is why Jesus visited this family frequently because where ever he went to Jerusalem to teach he would then go down to Bethany to rest. Bethany is also next to the Kidron Valley. The same Kidron from which Cheri's home town in Ohio gets its name. Now Lazarus' sister is Mary and because Mary was a common name in those days, we are told that this is the same Mary who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. This is a reference to something that will be described in chapter 12 and shows how important this Mary was to the early Christian community. From setting we move to opening action.

In verse 3, Mary and Martha send word to Jesus saying, “Lord, your dear friend is very sick”. Notice that they don’t tell Jesus what to do. They only tell him what is going on and they leave it up to him to decide what needs to be done. Not that Mary or Martha had any ambiguity in their minds about what Jesus should do. Of course they knew what outcome they wanted. They wanted Jesus to come and heal Lazarus right away because he was that bad. For the sisters it was their 911 moment. And yet, they do not presume to tell Jesus what to do. They only bring the situation to him. And when they do, they refer to their brother as “your friend”. A subtle move to make Jesus own the problem. I want to pause here for a minute. Very often when we pray and I do this myself, we focus on what God needs to do. Now don’t get me wrong, it is not that we should never ask God. He is our Father and even Jesus taught us to pray words like “give us this day our daily bread”. It is a clear “ask” for a specific outcome. And yet asking God for a particular outcome is not the best thing to do for every situation. Because whatever solution you are thinking about may be very small compared to the plans that God has. Think of the difference between Lazarus falling sick, being healed and going about his life compared to what actually happened here and the outcome of it. The difference between Mary and Martha’s desired outcome and what happened is the exact difference between our immediate desires and what God’s desires and plans are. The difference is as big as life and death.

There is another Mary, his mother who gets this right. Remember Jesus’ mother does the same thing when they run out of wine at the wedding. She does not tell him what to do. She only gives the problem to Jesus and instructs the servants to follow Jesus’ orders. We tend to do the opposite. We get bulldozed by those we are supposed to be leading and give orders to God. Funny right who we get things backward? Sometimes we just need to give our problems to Jesus and let him tell us what to do.

So bringing our eyes back to Jesus, when Mary and Martha’s problem come to him, what does he do? Well Jesus turns to his disciples and gives them a prophetic message.

He says, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this". Now his disciples would not have understood this then, but Jesus was referring to two dimensions of glory here. When Lazarus was resurrected, this would be a demonstration on earth of Jesus' divine power. When Jesus sees his power they are going to be amazed and take him very seriously thus "bringing Him glory". But this glory Jesus know really counted for nothing because it was going to be short lived. He came to this world ultimately for the cross. And at the cross there is great powerlessness. So any demonstration of power on the part of Jesus would be wiped out by the image of Jesus on the cross. Yet, throughout John's Gospel John, when a reference was made to the Son of Man being glorified it is a specific reference to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. And what Jesus was preparing his disciples to understand was that whatever you are going to see happen to Lazarus is going to lead to something much bigger and whatever that thing is, will glorify God.

After Jesus' comments to his disciples the very next verse says, "so although Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for the next two days". We are going to wrestle with this verse here for a bit. You see this verse begins with "so". So what? Well, Jesus says, the purpose of the Lazarus' sickness is to glorify God. "so" he delays going to Bethany for 2 days. Meaning that his delay was necessary so that God can get the glory through Lazarus' situation.

Here is the deal though. If we move back to the scene playing out at Mary and Martha's place, it does not look pretty. Lazarus would have died as the sisters were waiting. People were in mourning. The sisters were heart broken. And remember, this family's association with Jesus the miraculous healer was known. So when a family this close to Jesus is affected, people start talking, right? In our world if you are a believer and profess your faith, then anything you say or do or anything that happens to you is immediately judged by the world isn't? So there is that layer of embarrassment too that this happened to Jesus' friends. But if you forget the society and focus just on Mary and

Martha, here is the situation. They gave their problem to Jesus. And the problem when to the point of no return and they did not hear anything back from Jesus. You see to every request, there are four possible answers, yes, yes but..., no and not yet, right?

In Mary's situation, God's response would have felt like a "no". It was actually not a "no" but a "not yet". Of ten it is hard to discern between a "no" and a "not yet". But the problem is, when we are young in our faith, we cannot take anything but "yes" for an answer from God. And when we get a "no" it feels like God is not there. It feels like he is absent. Do you think Mary and Mary felt deserted by God in those 2 or three days when they did not have any hope. I sure think they felt very deserted.

I think the feeling gets even deeper than that. You see if you are stranded on a remote island and calling for help and don't hear anything back, you would be sad but you probably were not expecting to hear anything back anyway, so it is sad but in line with your expectations. But if on the other hand you were on a remote island and you would see a ship passing by and you signal to the ship and you know the people on the ship have seen you and they just ignore your signals and continue sailing into the sunset, now can you imagine how that feels? It is a deeper kind of despair. It is a despair, mixed in with frustration and a good measure of anger as well right? Now think of Mary and Martha's situation. They know what Jesus can do. They know where he is. He is literally just 2 miles away remember? That's a 30 min walk. But still no Jesus for 2 days. And they don't know if he is going to show up at all. Remember "not yet's" feel like "nos" in the moment.

But because we know how this story ends and because Jesus tells us his purpose for his delay, we can draw these conclusions to the "nos" and "not yet's" you may have heard from God in your life.

The first possible reason for a perceived God absence or a “no or “not yet” from God is a Lazarus parallel. The delay is because God is allowing the situation to become worse because when the darkness of despair has deepened, then the light of God’s glory will shine even brighter. The darker the room, the brighter any light turned on will shine right? Sometime God needs to wait for things to get worse just so that He can show you his power in a way you never thought possible. This is the Lazarus parallel for God’s perceived absence.

But there is a second possibility. The second possibility is to do with the work God wants to do in the life of the one who is asking for relief. You see you can ask for relief from a situation and it is Ok to ask God for relief. But it may not be God’s purpose to give you that relief right now, because whatever you are going through may be your “thorn in the flesh”. And people are given thorns in their flesh because it is serving a spiritual purpose. If God were to remove this particular thorn in the flesh, he may have to replace it with some other thorn in the flesh to further his ultimate purpose of shaping you to become more like him. So you might as well keep the thorn in the flesh that you are familiar with, that the thorn in the flesh that you don’t know anything about, right? 😊 Sometimes the “no” is our God saying, “yeah, trust me on this, this thorn in the flesh is better than the alternatives. Just hang on to me, learn your spiritual lessons and use it for your sanctification”. When you think God is not answering your prayers, he might actually be saying, “child I am sanctifying you. Have patience. I am not absent! You need this even if you don’t like it”.

But there is a third possible reason for not hearing anything from God when we ask for something. You might throw something at me when I tell you what the third reason is. But it is extremely necessary to say this when we are talking about something as big as explaining the mind of God. The third reason for God’s silence to are requests is that there are things that God does that are beyond our capacity to understand. And so when it comes to those things, God does not bother to explain it because it would be a

waste of time. We would never understand even in a thousand years. Is 55:8 says, My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. God's ways are higher than our ways. In those cases all we need to know is that God has promised to never leave us so His perceived absence is just an illusion. All we have to do is continue trusting him and continue to be faithful to him. He loves us unconditionally and our job is to love him back unconditionally. When we don't hear any answer from God, sometimes it is because the answer is beyond our "pay grade".

We look at three possible reasons for the perceived God absence when it is actually God saying no or not yet to us. The three answers are the Lazarus parallel, where he is about to do much greater than we know to ask for, or the answer is "no" because whatever you are facing is necessary for shaping you. Finally, you may not be hearing an answer from God because the answer is above your pay grade and God feels it is a situation where what God wants from you is to simply trust him.

Remember it is when we don't get what we want from God and are still faithful that we are exercising true faith. And it is by faith alone that we please God. I pray that each of us are able to be faithful and strong in our Mary and Martha moments when we feel that God is holding back from us. Because it may be our greatest opportunity to please God by our faithfulness, be shaped into his image or see something greater than we could imagine. Let us pray.