

Sermon – 5th Lent
John 11:1-44
April 2, 2017

“Were Have You Been Jesus?”

“*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” Jesus...late? Is such even possible? Seriously, have you ever sensed that God’s timing in your life was to say the least not the best? How far into a distressing situation have you gone before you’ve felt some sense of direction, some hope of resolution, some inkling of peace or some evidence of healing? Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot wrote a song in the 1970’s about a shipwreck on Lake Superior. An ore carrier named the Edmond Fitzgerald went down in a November gale near Whitefish Bay, and in one memorable lyric he asked “*does anyone know where the love of God goes, when the waves turn the minutes to hours.*” Could you not say the same waiting outside the ER; could that not describe the first night after your job layoff, or you’re loved one’s lingering illness?

A pair of sisters named Mary and Martha knew that the love of God – Jesus – was a measly two miles from their village. Yet that love took his time arriving and they had to endure minutes that seemed like hours, until their brother sank beneath the waves of death. Sure, there’s a happy ending to their story – but not without them having to contend with time and its traveling buddies worry, frustration and grief. Folks then as now like resolutions to problems – and time bound creatures like us find it hard to wait for most anything. Even though he knew things were getting out of hand, even if his friend Lazarus’ breathing became intermittent and labored; his eyes sunken and tired – Jesus waited. Even if Mary and Martha were pacing the floor and scanning the horizon for signs of Jesus, he toured Jerusalem instead. Jesus could have been there – by one household’s reckoning should have been there. Where did the love of God go? Why was it late? Mary and Martha are a study of faith seeking answers – not a bad thing, and in similar situations we often try to supply of our own.

There are sayings, perhaps you’ve used them - that go like this - “*the will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.*” Or “*don’t look at the mountain look to the mover of mountains.*” The sentiment of these slogans is that God will not give you more than you can handle. To the extent that means God does not *inflict* suffering upon us or *tempt* us to sin, that’s true. But in truth the wrinkles in every aging brow and the gray hairs on every aging head are at least in part due to the fact that the world often does give us more than we can handle, even though this is after all – our Father’s world – or so the song goes. Mary and Martha have faith, no second guessing that. But they may have done some second guessing about Jesus as they pondered why he would allow a man he loved to die. To just shrug this off and say “*oh well, everybody is going to die someday*” is not very comforting. Jesus is late...*on purpose.*

Death likes to claim that it is large and in charge of things, particularly time does it not? When a hospital's intercom crackles with the message "*Code Blue*," like it did for me one night when I was a chaplain in training that was a signal that nothing else mattered in my schedule except the patient for whom that code was called. Physicians and nurses and yes, chaplains abruptly stop whatever they are doing. Routine goes out the window. Death had put someone on the clock and we needed to ignore ours and get to it.

But not Jesus - he gets a "*Code Blue*" on Lazarus, death has put a friend on the clock, and he takes his time. Why? In order to show that he is Lord over death and therefore over time. "*To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven*" – so says the Ecclesiastes 3:1. Translation - death has its day, in a sense it has its say - but not the final one. Likes to think it has though. So Jesus arrived in Bethany on his schedule, not deaths. When he got to the tomb of Lazarus it mattered not one whit how many days he'd been there, because the minute Jesus arrived death's minutes became numbered.

Thomas Dorsey was a kid from Georgia born in 1899. He was introduced to music early in his life –and was enamored of the emerging genre of American music called “the blues.” When his family moved to Chicago in his teens, Thomas honed his skills in piano composition and led some great Chicago jazz bands. In the 20’s he even played barrelhouse piano under the stage name of “Georgia Tom” at one of Al Capone’s speakeasies. But about that time, Thomas was also introduced to the Lord Jesus, and began writing gospel songs. Then, in August 1932, while in St. Louis doing a show, he was handed a telegram with the words “*your wife Nettie is ill – come right away.*” He found a phone, called home, only to told...Nettie was dead. A friend drove him through the night - home to Chicago, and upon arriving the next morning, he learned that the infant son Nettie was giving birth to the night before had also died.

“I felt God had done me wrong, done me an injustice” he later said. *“I didn’t want to serve him anymore or write anymore music.”* But a few days later, at the piano – a sudden calm came over him. Jesus had arrived. As his fingers began to move over the keys Mr. Dorsey said *“words began to fall in place on my melody, like water drops from the crevice of a rock...Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light; take my hand, precious Lord lead me home.”*

“God so loved the world,” John 3:16 says, *“that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him”* - can forget about their clocks. Instead of watching them in the crucibles of life, worrying about each tick and tock, and whether disappointment or death is about to call, we dare to believe that Jesus has already come calling with life. When Jesus called on the village of Bethany - on folks for whom the minutes of the last four days had turned to hours, he didn’t just order a tombstone rolled back - he ordered death to pay real careful attention. Its time was about over. Till that moment the common conviction was that Jesus was late. Till the moment Jesus took Lazarus by the hand and with the light of the Son squarely in lots of astonished eyes, he showed for all time that hope will never run out of time. AMEN

