The Waiting Is the Hardest Part

John 11

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Last Sunday was a Big Deal for our church. For the first time ever, we took our traditional worship service, set in this beautiful 160-year-old room, and put it on the internet live. I'd like to say thank you to everyone who helped us pull that off, and I'd also like to thank everyone who has offered their encouragement in the week since—it means a lot to know that so many of you found something soothing, inspiring, and familiar in the midst of a time that has frayed nerves, dulled senses, and jarred all of us around the world.

If you weren't here in the room last Sunday—and obviously most of you weren't—then you missed a fascinating moment. We gathered here before 11:00 to make the last preparations, to get everything and everyone positioned correctly, and to hook up all of the wires and cables. About ten 'til eleven, Dr. Chapman led us in a prayer. Then we all drew in a deep breath (standing six feet or more apart from each other) …and we waited.

The sanctuary was completely silent. I didn't hear any cars driving past, or anyone coughing in the pews, or the rustling of paper. It was not the instructed silence that we sometimes share in worship, one where we sense that we are engaged in a communal moment of reflection. It was not a commanded silence at all…there was no reason for us to be hushed. We just didn't have anything left to say or do.

The quiet stayed with us up to 11:00, through the prerecorded video…and then we were live.

Everything seemed to go pretty normally from that point forward, even if it was a little lonely in this big, sparse room. The music, the prayers, the scripture, the sermon…most of the familiar pieces were here, and we embraced their familiarity in this room just as you did at home through your computer screen. But for me the moments right before the service were not familiar, or (despite the silence) even all that peaceful. They were instead a little tense, the jitters a basketball team feels before tip-off, a calm that is keenly aware of an upcoming potential storm. It felt like when the sky turns dark before a tornado comes…there's no rain, and no wind, and yet there remains a palpable sense of fear and trepidation…and there is nothing anyone can do but wait.

The past two weeks or so have been unfathomably hard, but for me, the waiting has been the hardest part.

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The gospel lesson this morning features Jesus in a holding pattern. He is in an undisclosed, apparently unimportant place, and the action is taking place in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Lazarus is close to death, so close that by the time word reaches Jesus of his illness, the man is probably already gone.

This is one of the two parts of the story that captivates preachers and students the most. When Jesus learns of Lazarus's illness and surmises Lazarus's death, he does not act. He waits. He stays where he is—in a nondescript place doing things that merit no mention by the author of John—and waits.

He doesn't wait because he has something important to do, or because he can't find a ride, or because the government issued an order mandating that he stay where he is. His disciples think that maybe he hesitates because he is afraid—the crowd in Bethany has been hostile to him in the past—but Jesus' actions in the following verses, where he does eventually go to Bethany and then to Jerusalem for the final week of his life, disprove that notion. He may be afraid, but that is not what keeps him from going.

The standard Sunday school explanation for Jesus' pause is that he waits so that others will grow in faith and in understanding. He waits for Lazarus to be good and fully dead, "in the tomb four days," so that the raising of Lazarus will have the desired impact and pave the way for Jesus' own resurrection in the coming weeks. That's fine. The scripture itself tells us that this is (at least part of) what's going on, so it seems reliable.

It just seems too easy. It almost turns Jesus into a smiling magician, one who asks the audience to accept that he's going to saw a woman in half while displaying none of the feeling or motivation that would typically accompany that act. It turns the raising of Lazarus into a performance instead of a miracle…and I have a very hard time with that reading.

It is also a reading that runs against the other part of the story that captivates preachers and students, the famously "shortest verse in the Bible," verse 35: "Jesus wept."

I have read those nine letters hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. They still strike me deep within, moving me to a place that the majesty of other scripture cannot. There is an undeniable power in the simplicity of those two words. They express Jesus' sadness over the loss of Lazarus, although he knows that Lazarus will return; they express his frustration with his friends who—even though they have traveled with him and listened carefully to his teaching for years—still don't seem to understand who he is or what he's about; they express the fear of his upcoming arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They could even express his joy that Martha seems to have faith in him, the lone ray of light in the midst of the turbulence he cannot escape. If preachers could express as much as Jesus does in two words, worship services would be twenty minutes shorter.

Part of why I have read that verse so much is that it is conveying so many things, and I think it is probably impossible for me to understand everything that is in there, even after multiple readings. Jesus is experiencing, at least, a slew of emotions: anger, sorrow, frustration, fear, denial, remorse, joy, acceptance, relief. Some of those emotions seem contradictory, but anyone who has lived long enough knows that they can occur at the same time. Jesus weeps—at least in part—because he is grieving.

And I would argue this: Jesus waits to go to Lazarus for the same reason. He is grieving.

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This week, one of First Baptist's members sent the staff an email that included an article entitled "The Discomfort You Are Feeling Is Grief." It is a great little piece, a summary of a longer article that articulates our loss of normalcy, connection, safety, and stability. It explains our current communal state structured through the Kubler-Ross "Five Stages of Grief," and it is remarkable how accurate that structure is.

It also says this: "The main grief we are living through is called anticipatory grief, the feeling we get when we are concerned about what the future holds when we are uncertain. When we are feeling this, the mind goes to the future and imagines the worst which causes anxiety."[1] That is where I have been the past few weeks, and where it feels like our world has been, a community tied up by its shared sense of anticipatory grief.

Fortunately, this article provides some guides for support—it's not one of those dreary pieces that names a problem but doesn't suggest any kind of solution. And nearly all of those guides are things that we as Christians would associate with sabbath. They are encouragements to inhale deeply and exhale slowly, to notice the things around you, to pause and take hold of the present instead of becoming gripped by the future. They are, essentially, exhortations to wait.

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The last time our country found itself waiting—like this, all of us waiting at once, for the same reason, with the same feeling—was in the fall of 2001. On an otherwise mundane Tuesday, we watched the news as it unfolded, and then we clung to it in the following days as we tried to piece together what our forever-altered world was going to look like now. We gravitated toward our homes and churches, slogged through the confusion and the despair, and sought out family wherever we could find it.

We waited then because our grief left us no choice. It was something of a paralyzing moment, one that forced us simply to appreciate where we were because nothing else felt certain. We claimed sabbath because, again, it was all that we could do.

After 9/11, the waiting was relatively short-lived. We found ways to return to work, to school, to the skies. We were changed—our world was changed—and perhaps we continued to appreciate the present a little more, at least for a while, and to seek out sheltering moments of sabbath a little more frequently than we had before…but the waiting, the hard and even painful waiting, was relatively short.

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That was not the case after the other seminal moment of my twenties. In the spring of 2006, I took a small group of college students to New Orleans to help with the rebuilding effort after Katrina. We drove down in one van, spent the week in sleeping bags on a church fellowship hall floor, and ate our meals at one table. We spent the whole week together, and as a result, it was rarely quiet.

The exception to that was when we drove to the Lower 9th Ward, one of New Orleans's poorest communities and one that was among the hardest hit by the storm. We walked through deserted streets and stared slack-jawed at the debris. There were houses on top of cars on top of boats, abandoned framed photos and stuffed animals reminding us of the everyday life left behind, and piles of debris everywhere. We walked through that neighborhood for over an hour, covering every street, taking in as much as we could. No one said a word.

[1] Tracy Jenkins, "The Discomfort You Are Feeling Is Grief" Article Summary, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2020.

This was nine months after the storm had abated. There were other neighborhoods, we learned, that had just gotten their water turned back on the week before we arrived. Many of the people who lived in these neighborhoods—including the 9th Ward—remained. Waiting. They had no choice.

When we were in New Orleans, it still felt very empty. Many people had left, and many of those have not returned. But the ones who remained were bound together in a place of halted mourning. I cannot imagine and will not pretend to know what their heartache was like. But—like 9/11—the grief of those living through Katrina was accompanied by a time of sabbath. The residents of New Orleans had to wait for months, some of them for longer, and to find strength in the waiting, comfort in their calm. They had to find sabbath.

After 9/11, the grief demanded that we pause. But from what I could tell in New Orleans, for those folks, the sabbath kind of came first. There was this long period of stillness, and the ones who chose to remain were required somehow to make it a positive experience, to gather themselves and refocus, to appreciate the small blessings of the present, maybe even to find opportunity to rest. And when they did that, it created room for them to mourn, for the sadness and anger and feeling to rise to the surface…and, eventually, for healing to begin.

They are slightly different experiences—grief that commands sabbath; sabbath that allows for grief—but there is no doubt that the two are intertwined, that the two are extremely important in overwhelmingly difficult times, and that the two require a remarkably hard waiting.

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We don't really know why Jesus waits—we don't know if he is creating a pause that will allow him to grieve or if he is so overwhelmed by the grief that he has no other choice. What we do know is how he waits. He waits intentionally and purposefully. He appreciates where he is and who he is around, even though these details are so ordinary that the author of John barely mentions them. He waits with an eye on the future (not only the return to Lazarus but also the week in Jerusalem that will follow), and yet he doesn't allow that future to consume him or exhaust him. He waits in prayer. We know these things because, when he emerges from that waiting, he confronts the disciples' lack of understanding, and Mary's weeping, and Martha's faith, and Lazarus's death. He will soon encounter the joyous throng along his entry into Jerusalem, a final meal with loved ones, betrayal, arrest, torture, abandonment, and crucifixion…and he is confronting the anticipatory grief of all of this as well.

We know that his wait included elements of sabbath because there is no way he could have managed all of this otherwise.

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The waiting in this room last week was brief…but it was hard. We missed you. We missed the choir and the organ, the sight of folks reconnecting with smiles on their faces after a week apart, the nervous joy of children. In some ways, being here allowed us to experience something very familiar, and in other ways—especially in the waiting at the top of the hour—it felt very foreign.

This is how I have been describing so much the past few weeks. In many ways, everything feels normal. My family is healthy and doing a lot of the same things that we would do during spring break or over the summer. We have food and water, shelter and power. We go outside to walk the dogs; we come inside to watch TV. All of these things are normal.

And yet, as anyone knows, there is absolutely nothing normal about it. The word—even after two weeks—the word that I hear the most to describe this moment in time is "surreal." We have not yet entered "the new normal," whatever that is going to be. "The new normal" remains on the other side, blurry and unknown. We can do nothing but anticipate it. And so we wait.

We have the power to determine how we wait. Our waiting can be one that is gripped by fear, by anticipatory grief, by anger and sorrow. Or our waiting can be one that incorporates moments of sabbath, a waiting where we acknowledge our fear and grief and anger and sorrow…but also where we acknowledge deep breaths and the color of spring and the warmth of the sun. Either way, the waiting will be hard. In some ways, the time of sabbath will be the hardest…we are not very good or very practiced at that. But it will be a waiting that prepares us, fortifies us, and steadies us. Those are all things we need right now.

The waiting in this room last week was hard, but it was also sacred. It was a different kind of sacred than what I normally experience in our sanctuary, but the power and presence of God was undeniable as we prepared to approach holiness. In times real or surreal, God embraces us.