

Human Angst, God's Timing
Psalm 130; John 11:1-45
April 2, 2017
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Psalm 130:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.*

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

*O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

John 11:1-45:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to

sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Yesterday, my older son, Charlie, who is home from college awoke holding his phone and said, "Mom, have you heard from Brooks (my younger son)? He's in the hospital -- he hit his head and had to have stitches!" I took in a big deep breath and said a prayer. "April fools!" Charlie said, laughing. Though I didn't think it was funny, I was grateful for his timing, that the April Fool's declaration had come quickly.

What struck me most this week in both passages read today was the issue of timing. In the Psalm, the psalmist cries out to the Lord from the depths of pain and sorrow to be heard, it is a cry of desperation: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!* The Lord is apparently not showing up.

In the gospel reading, Martha and Mary both cry out, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" and the consoling neighbors wonder, too, if Jesus could open the eyes of the blind man, couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying? "Where were you?" they want to know. Three times in the passage Jesus is accused of not acting quickly enough.

We can surely, all of us relate. For times we prayed and prayed for something. For the cancer to be removed, for the negative diagnosis, for the loved one to stop drinking, for the war to end, for the child to come home, for a job to come through, for death to not rear its ugly head. And yet the prayers are unanswered. The cancer spreads, the test results are positive, the drinking continues, the war rages, the child is missing, the unemployment remains, the person, the pet, the baby, the loved one dies.

We are left to ask, "God did you hear me and reject my request, or are you too busy elsewhere and didn't hear, or don't care, or maybe, are you not really there?"

It is when we are in this state, in this place of defeat and despair, that we can take our cue from Martha. Martha does not receive what she wants. She sends a message for Jesus to come quickly, to come to save and heal her brother Lazarus, and Jesus doesn't show up in time. It's too late. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," she says as she goes to meet Jesus when he finally arrives. We know her agony. We relate to her pain.

So it is in her next affirmation that we are meant to take heed. She says, "But even now, even though Lazarus is dead, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Somehow, Martha believes in the power of God even when her prayers are unanswered. Even when things don't turn out the way she wants. Even when she is left with the worst-case scenario.

This is what we hear today from the psalmist, and from our own singers today – I'm waiting for the morning. "I wait for the Lord," the psalmist says, "my soul waits, and in his word I hope; for with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem." *I'm waitin' for the mornin', till the sun is gonna rise*, our singers

sing today. This is the life-saving hope that keeps us going, that sustains us even when we are faced with unanswered prayers. That God will come through. It has been said, "It will all turn out okay in the end, and if it's not okay, it's not the end."

When Mary expresses this hope to Jesus, this hope in the power of God through him, he tells her that Lazarus will rise again, because he himself is the resurrection and the life; that those who believe in him, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in him will never die. Jesus' statement reveals that all who have faith will find life in this world and the next. *My soul waits, and in his word I hope. I'm waitin' for the mornin', till the sun is gonna rise.*

Stephen Bauman, pastor of Christ Church in New York City, tells of a young professional who was caught in an extremely difficult situation and could not see a way out. He said that whenever he came to church, he took to focusing on the lines of Scripture inscribed high on the chancel wall. Above an image of John the Baptist is the passage, "Let not your hearts be troubled" from John 14 and above Moses' picture are two short phrases from Psalm 27, "Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage." The man said those sentiments over and over and over and they were the prayers he kept in his heart.

Sometimes he would sit in the balcony of the church and the light coming in from the back window would illuminate the phrases and he felt that he was being held by them. In this dark time, the man learned about patience and waiting. He learned about his relationship with God during his time of suffering. He was in a place of darkness, unable to perceive and clarify his identity and purpose, his freedom and his future. He felt trapped. He chose to sweat it out with God, praying that his troubled heart could find courage in the waiting. *Let not your hearts be troubled. Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage,* he kept saying over and over.

Eventually, the wait was over. Things turned around. A new day dawned. He was no longer trapped. The earth's rotation had left the darkness behind. The man credited his waiting and praying, counting on God's enduring presence despite the lack of evidence at the time. The explanation Jesus gives in the gospel passage is that God's glory will be made manifest in his delay. That God's glory is worth waiting for, worth hoping for.

There have been times in my life when I had to wait in angst, and it was only in hindsight that I understood the waiting was an opportunity for God's glory. The rejection notice, the letter of deferral, or of being put on the waitlist, allowed for maturity and growth that would not have otherwise happened. Sometimes, the outcome of a situation is not as we had wished. And only in retrospect do we understand that God had been there all along, executing a result that we had not considered possible. Sometimes in our suffering we meet our buried humility that allows us to surrender and ask for God's help. And so we wait, expectant. We wait, in anticipation of what God can do.

When Jesus asks for the stone to be removed from the tomb where the dead Lazarus lays, Martha reminds him that he has been dead four days, and the stench will be unbearable. "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" The stone is removed, and Jesus prays, demonstrating for the crowd at the tomb and for us how the proclamation of our faith is carried out: "Father, I thank you for having heard me."

It is then that Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out, and when Lazarus stumbles out, bound with strips of burial cloth around him, Jesus tells the onlookers to unbind him and let him go. In this way, they participate in his release. They are part of his resurrection. They are part of Jesus' timing. Their joining with Jesus in oneness affirms God's glory and deliverance.

The psalm and the story of the raising of Lazarus reveal how we are meant to cry out for help and wait; to acknowledge and trust in the Lord, and wait; to witness to God's glory and participate in healing, hope and transformation.

The good news is that we are given the promise of new life. We are called to believe and to treasure the moments of resurrection power, of renewed life, of sun after the rain, of the chemo having worked after a long sickness, the negative diagnosis and clear margins, of the rehab finally taking this time, of peace being made, of the job coming through, the child coming home. This is God's power at work.

When we are anxious in the waiting, we are reminded that God accompanies us into our unknown future. God's timing is not necessarily our timing. Isaiah 60:22 reads, "When the time is right, I, the Lord, will make it happen."

Please join me in prayer:

Healing God, we are sometimes so sure that things will not work out, and we doubt your ability to put things right in our lives. We thank you that Jesus came to show us that our most dreaded enemy--death--can be overcome by faith. Heal our doubts and our longings for assurance and give us spirits of trust and hope. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.