



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Life on the fourth day”
John 11:1-45, Ezekiel 37
Will Sparks April 6th 2014

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

How are you with waiting? Waiting on hold. Waiting in line. Waiting for the appointment call. Waiting to hear back. I'm not bad depending on the circumstances. If I am waiting with a good point to it, a thing to look forward to, then I'm fine. Or if I don't have too much on the line, there is not great urgency, I'm also fine. But if there is urgency, or if I have a lot riding on whatever I am waiting for, well, I'm a little insufferable. Being on hold can be kind of ugly too. Any company with a answering service that says, "your call is very important to us..." has two minutes before I start feeling lied to.

Now Martha and Mary had a lot at stake and there was urgency. I understand how Mary and Martha felt. They had called for Jesus. He was down near the Jordan where John had been baptizing. Close enough to get to Bethany. Really close if your dear friend is dying!

But Jesus doesn't seem too concerned. I know the gospel writer sees him as a wisdom master with a far bigger perspective than me and everyone else who is in a panic that Jesus hasn't arrived, but I'm with Martha, and Mary. Then suddenly, all too suddenly it is too late. Lazarus is dead. All human hope is now superfluous. It is too late.

Have you ever been there? I have. Too late to fix, too late to call out, too late even to hope. It's just too late. Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead. He tells his disciples this brutal truth. Only then does he decide to go to nearby Bethany. He arrives on the fourth day. The day that is beyond all hope. All through Scripture the third day is the day that God acts. Jesus arrives on the hopeless day, the fourth.

He bears the ire of Martha, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died!” It is pretty easy to hear the subtext on that conversation. The gospel writer is too polite to make that explicit, but it is there in spades. “Where the hell were you?” She says as she tearfully pounds her fists in his chest until he wraps his arms around her grief-stricken body. That's what I see in this story. I'm kind of with Martha and Mary on this one.

And then, Jesus himself weeps at his dead friend's tomb. Yet even at the tomb as he takes on the grief in the air, he calls forth life and liberation from that hopeless hole, on the hopeless day, amidst a hopeless crowd. He calls forth life in the midst of certain confirmed, putrefied and stinking death.

You know, honestly there is much about this story that I don't quite know what to do with. I have looked at this story of death and resurrection, of Jesus' aloofness and his grief. Year after year I look at it and the deep mystery of this event continues to cloud round me like soupy fog.

All I know is that I have been hopeless before. I've seen my fair share of fourth days. You probably have been too. At the back of the line, waiting and waiting. Praying and praying. Willing and willing. In a job that just feel dry as dust but not able to see a way back to life. In a relationship that is not what you expected but not knowing where to go from here. Pressed on all sides, rung out, tapped out. It happens to the best of us. We reach the end of our resources. And

then somewhere just after the third day you have given up. You have resigned. You have resented. It is finished. It's too late!

This is the empty place. This is the valley of the dry bones. Can these bones live. Can someone prophesy to these bones, someone speak a work of hope to this people, this person, this life? Please? In the dark of failed relationships, failed programs for happiness, failed dreams of beauty and happy endings.

Friends I want to tell you that in the entombed hopeless reality of life's darkness, I have heard an untimely voice. A voice that called my name. It is the witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ that exactly at that point, in that real lived place, when life is tapped out, cornered, pressed on all sides, standing in front of the tomb that contains what used to be your hopes and dreams, that a word of life comes. Just like Lazarus, for me life and liberation comes- through the tears of Jesus and the torment of my hopelessness.

Do you know what the name Lazarus means? It means "God has helped." The story of Lazarus, coming as it does before Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem, coming as it does the week before we too turn our face towards Jerusalem, this story is the resurrection story that comes before the crucifixion. In the Lazarus story, the power of God to bring life out of death gets a jump on powers of death that come later in Jerusalem. In the story of Lazarus we get a glimpse of a God who does not settle with hopeless, who does not let the fourth day go by without a response, who does not stand impassive at the tombs of the world but weeps and calls forth life. Lazarus, God has helped, and does help, and will help. God did not become a God of resurrection and life when Jesus came along. No, God has, does and will be a God of impossible hope, life on the fourth day.

Now untie me and let me go! Amen.