

“When Jesus is Late”

John 11:1-7, 17-44

Fifth Sunday of Lent, (March 26) 2023

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You know this story. It’s one of the most beloved stories in the New Testament and we’ve heard it read many times, often at funeral services. We know how the story ends and that’s where the dramatic emphasis is – on the raising of Lazarus, but I want us to pause early in the story. I want to look at where Jesus is on his way and grief-stricken Martha goes out to meet him. She goes out to confront the one person in the world she thought she could depend on. With a sense of betrayal in her voice, she says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21).

I think that Martha has a point. Jesus has already healed a man who was blind from the day he was born back in John 9 and which we talked about last week. Back in John 5, Jesus has already gone to the pool at Bethesda and found a man paralyzed 38 years, and told him, “Pick up your mat and walk,” and in the power of God the man did just that. Way back in Cana, in John 4, a desperate young father came all the way from Capernaum to seek him. “Sir, please come. Please, it’s my son – I’m losing my son. Please come. Please come now! I’m running out of time.” Jesus said, “Go! Your son will be well,” and that very hour he was.

So, can we agree, Martha has a point? “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died” – but he wasn’t there. Martha has a point because Jesus was their friend. We know that Jesus spent time in their home in Bethany. Bethany, a small village outside of Jerusalem, was about as far from Jerusalem as

it is from here to Java Jacks, was where Jesus stayed when he came to Jerusalem. It was in their home where Jesus taught while Martha busily got supper ready, and Mary sat on the floor listening to what Jesus had to say. They were friends. Frederick Buechner says that those times when Jesus got tired of being the Messiah, when he needed a break, he went to their house to relax. So, when he got the message that Lazarus, his friend, was ill, that Lazarus, whom he loved, was sick, he didn't go. We can understand then the sense of betrayal in Martha's voice.

He didn't go. And it's not as if the problem was Jesus' packed schedule. It's not as if he could look at Martha and say, "You know, Martha, I'm sorry. I would have been there, but I was feeding the 5,000. You know, Martha, nothing would have pleased me more than to be right at Lazarus' side, but I had a previous speaking engagement with the multitudes." John makes it absolutely clear that the reason he did not go was because he never intended to go. The way John puts it is, even though he loved Martha, even though he loved Mary, even though he loved Lazarus, when he got the word that his friend whom he loved was ill and needed him, he decided to stay two more days in the place where he was. He waited until time had run out, and Lazarus was dead.

Lord, if you had been here; but you didn't come, and we ran out of time.

It is a theological sign of a broken and fallen and tragic and suffering world that we are running out of time – all of us. Like a scene from an old movie, the camera focuses on an hourglass and zooms in so we can see that the last few grains of sand are running out. We are running out of time. Down at the end of every corridor stands death with a leering face, holding up an alarm clock and saying, "I own time. Time belongs to me, and you are running out of time."

More than once I've visited someone in ICU and they've said through their oxygen tubes and IV's and humming, beeping machines, "I wish I had more time."

Over the past several years, I have had the opportunity to visit several divinity schools and seminaries. Many of my best friends, some of whom go back to our college days together, teach at seminaries and divinity schools. One of the constant themes I've observed and heard is that students are discouraged. Many churches still drag their feet over calling and ordaining women clergy. The Southern Baptist Convention just kicked out one of the largest churches in the country, Saddleback Church in California because they have ordained women on their staff. Some Southern Baptist hardliners recently made a list of 170 churches on the Southern Baptist rolls who have ordained women on their staffs, and these hardliners want to kick out all 170 churches. At the same time, ministerial students see churches fighting over welcoming gay and lesbian Christians in their congregations. The United Methodists are in a big fight over it and are splitting. I also know of numerous local churches in fights and running off pastors, conservative and long serving pastors, because it is not enough to be conservative in many churches, apparently you have to be a Trump supporter from the pulpit, or you are forced out. Churches which for decades had all kinds of people with different political views sitting in the same congregation and serving and loving one another, have become battlegrounds. As a result, for any of these reasons and more, students in divinity schools and seminaries are running in the opposite direction of the local church. They want nothing to do with congregations. They want to follow Jesus; they want to be Christian. But they see the church as an obstacle to following Jesus Christ.

One professor said, “It is so sad to see our students so early in their careers running up against injustice in the church. They are so young, and the church is already taking away their future.”

We are running out of time.

We read the news and the reports coming out of Austin and Washington every day. Gov. Abbott and Lt. Gov. Patrick are hellbent to get school vouchers passed in the legislature. Vouchers mean taking public tax money and using it to support private and charter schools. It does not matter that local public schools are the lifeblood of local communities. It doesn't matter that local public schools need more public funding, not less.

I find myself asking where is all this meanness coming from? Why the vitriol aimed at those who are LGBTQ? Especially I'm shocked at the whipped-up frenzy of outrage vented toward transgender young people, so politicians can get elected.

It's very much why we at Austin Heights need to recommit ourselves to this being a safe place, a safe community. And a reminder that churches like us, might very well not only be a safe place but one of the few places where people can talk about such things as racism. The church might very well be the one place where we can listen to one another and read books and talk about the facts of history instead of sticking to old-outmoded myths of “heritage” and “our southern way of life.”

So often I feel as if we are running out of time.

This past week, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released an alarming report on what's being called a "climate time-bomb." Among the many eye-popping things in the report:

If emissions aren't cut this decade, catastrophic climate change is all but guaranteed. A key component of the report said fossil fuel development has to stop. All the while, last week the Biden administration opened up oil and gas development in part of Alaska. Meanwhile, in Texas the governor is going to great lengths to protect oil and gas development while hamstringing renewable energy. Three weeks ago, Gov. Abbott said that new tax-breaks for corporations coming to Texas would not extend to renewable energy companies.

The upshot of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report is that we're running out of time.

"Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died; but we ran out of time."

And it was at that time, when the world felt it had run out of time, that Jesus said, "It is time to go to him. This is not simply about death, even Lazarus' death. This is about God."

So, hear me this morning. It is not Lazarus who has run out of time; it is death that has run out of time. It is not justice that has run out of time; it is injustice that is running out of time. It is not that hope has run out of time; it is despair that has run out of time. What I think that means for us is that, if we are going to be disciples of Jesus Christ, we are going to have to throw our wrist watches and our smart phones away, because Jesus will not participate in our alienated, fear-filled, despairing world that does not trust God and believes that hope and life and justice

are running out of time. Death and despair, meanness and hatred do not set the agenda. Jesus stands before every tomb and says, “I am the Lord of time. Come out, Lazarus! Come out!”

Theologian Karl Barth once said, “If I give you money, then I give you money. But if I give you my time, I give you me. If I give you my time, I give you all that I am.” God created time, said Barth, and in Jesus Christ “God makes time for you, has time for you, takes time for you, is time for you.” Standing at the end of the corridor is not death holding an alarm clock, saying “I own time.” It is rather Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

This is what baptism really means, you know. It’s moving from a world that is running out of time into a new world in which God gives us time and takes time. In a beautiful baptismal sermon from the fifth century by the old bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia (or Antioch), he told those who were about to be baptized what was going to happen to them. He said, “You will kneel on the floor, and you will face the West, the region of evil and darkness, and you will point your finger at the accuser, and you will say, ‘Satan, I renounce you and all your vanities, and all your angels and all your ministries.’” In other words, “Evil, I don’t have any more time for you.” “Then you will face the East, and you will find that the Bishop is in new clothes which are resplendent and dazzling and light, a symbol of a new world which you are entering. They dazzle because you will shine in that world. They are graceful and delightful for you will be graceful and delightful.” In other words, baptism is not simply joining the church or even changing identities. It is changing time zones! We are moving from a world that is running out of time to one where hope and justice will never die.

Does this mean that all our carbon emissions that are changing the climate are going to be magically taken away and that we simply do as we please? Am I saying that the Right-Wing politics of despair are of no concern?

No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that those of us who follow Christ do not quit hoping and fighting and working for change. There is more going on than what we know and what we can see. God is working in more ways than we understand.

I believe that we're much like sister Martha who is shocked and grieving over her brother's death. Who is angry Jesus did not show up in time. And in the middle of her despair, Jesus says 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?"

Martha, grieving and tired and angry, and even in despair still says, "Yes, Lord, I believe. I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One coming into the world. I believe you are the Lord of hope. I believe you are the Lord of Life. I believe you are the Lord of justice. I believe you are the Lord of history and the Lord of time."

I think we're like Martha, who are deeply discouraged but because of Christ, we are not ready to quit hoping and quit working for justice. We're not ready to give up and give in. We're not ready to throw in the towel and say, "Let them have it!" We're not ready to quit working for a better community for everyone in Nacogdoches.

Jesus arrived in Bethany right on time. He was on his schedule, not death's. When he got to the tomb of Lazarus, now dead four days, Jesus, the Lord of the

past, present, and future, reached into the future of his resurrection victory and reversed the past of Lazarus' death, thereby displaying the glory of God in the present.

Some years ago, a group of Mennonites, protesting our reliance on nuclear weapons, marched around the outside perimeter of a nuclear missile base. They marched around the base seven times like Joshua and the children of Israel marching around the city of Jericho. And like Joshua, at the end of their seventh trip, they stopped and blew trumpets, except their trumpets were toy trumpets for children. They stood there for a moment and a reporter said, "Well, the walls aren't tumbling down." One of the Mennonites responded, "Oh, but they will. They will."

Those Mennonites were on Jesus' time and not on the clocks of this world.

Jesus shows up with eternal time, eternal life, and those of us who follow him learn to tell time differently. When Jesus at last came calling on the little village of Bethany, everyone thought that he was too late. Death had won. Darkness was victorious.

But when Lazarus came forth from the tomb of death, eternal Life and Light shown forth. Everyone knew that Jesus was right on time.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.