

John 11:1-45

Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.'

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'

⁸ 'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?'

⁹ Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the day-time will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.'

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.'

¹² His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ ‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’

²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’

²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

²⁷ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked.

‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’

³⁷ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ ‘Take away the stone,’ he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.’

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this

for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.'

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.

Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Over the last three weeks we have visited several conversations Jesus had in John's Gospel. Jesus has spoken to Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and a man born blind. Here in chapter 11 Jesus has a conversation with his disciples prior to heading back to Bethany to resurrect Lazarus. Let's take a closer look at that now.

As so often happens, we actually need to take a step back to what has happened just prior in the text. Jesus has declared to many of the Jews the truth of who he is. He and the Father are one, and they chose not to believe him. They tried to stone him, but Jesus escaped and made his way back across the Jordan to the place that John had been baptising. Many people came to visit him there, and one of these was a messenger with an important message.

Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was sick. The word for sickness that John uses is a little broad, Lazarus could have been ill with a number of things. The weakness this word implies means that Lazarus would have been bed bound. With the medical techniques of that day and age, Lazarus was certainly going to die. Yet when Jesus heard this message, he stayed where he was two more days.

This verse sticks out to me as I read it. See, I like to think that I am patient. I can think of a number of times that I have waited and been rewarded for it. But when I think of someone that I know and love being in trouble, the sort of trouble that I can do something about...I'm not sure that I could wait to deal with it. Sure, I might take a few moments to make sure of what was actually happening and that I've got the full story, but I wouldn't hang out with my friends for two days before going off to see what I could do to solve this issue.

So why did Jesus wait? The obvious answer is that he is God, and that he had a plan. Perhaps, like me, you have found that answer to be a little frustrating at times. Yes, God has a plan, but it would be so much easier to trust him if we knew what it was! Let's see if the text can give us a more specific answer to this question.

The first people that we could look to for an answer about Jesus' waiting are Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They have sent a message to Jesus, they obviously trust him and don't even need to ask him to come to their aid. They expect it. Jesus has healed so many people at this point. He's shown that he can heal from afar with the centurion's daughter. So I can only imagine what the messenger thought when he heard Jesus response. "This sickness will not end in death." Right...but the message said the exact opposite. Did Jesus lack compassion? Did he truly love Lazarus? He had every capability of healing Lazarus, and he didn't. It's unclear if Lazarus heard Jesus' response before he died, but Mary and Martha certainly heard it before Jesus came to them. Would seeds of doubt begin to form in their minds as it seemed that Jesus wasn't coming to their aid?

I wonder if we as a church wrestle with similar doubt? It's not been that long ago that we found ourselves facing quarantine for a time. And churches around the world are facing increasing legal and practical difficulties...to the point of buildings being sold and congregations dissolving. And those that aren't facing these difficulties so often find themselves distracted and dickered over so many things that only seem to lead us away from God. And so here we are crying out with the psalmist today: God! Are we sick? Maybe we're next! Hear our prayers! Have mercy on us! Perhaps at times we ask the same question that might have been on Mary and Martha's mind: "God could fix this! Why does he wait?"

It is not from lack of compassion. Though Jesus waited, he did go to Martha, to Mary and to Lazarus. He wept to see the sisters suffering. And he comforted them with the truth: He is the resurrection and the life, all who believe in him will live, even though they die. I think we can safely say that Jesus did not lack compassion for the plight of this family.

But, we still haven't answered our question. Perhaps we should ask someone else in the text why it was that Jesus waited. Who better to tell us than Jesus'

disciples? We don't get to see their direct reaction to Jesus refusal to go heal Lazarus. We only see their reaction once Jesus decided to return, saying "Let us go back to Judea." They are a little surprised.

'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?'

Why had Jesus waited? The disciples clearly thought it was because he was afraid of dying. They're not completely wrong, Jesus' time of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane would show just how afraid he was. But the disciples might have asked this question for another reason.

Thomas voices his thoughts that heading back into Judea will not just be the death of Jesus, but the death of all the disciples. While Jesus might have feared the death he had to face on the cross, it was the disciples who were afraid of going to Lazarus here, not Jesus.

If it wasn't fear, or a lack of compassion, what was it that made Jesus not act immediately? Don't worry, there is a clear answer to this question and it comes from Jesus himself. We find the first bit of an answer in Jesus response to the messenger:

'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.'

All the way back in the second chapter of John, Jesus turned water into wine and revealed his glory. His disciples put their faith in him. Here, Jesus is going to reveal God's glory in a far more public and hard to miss fashion. He will show that God is supreme over even death, and people may begin to truly understand that he and the Father are one. Jesus waits so that God's glory might be revealed in his actions.

But there's more to Jesus waiting than just revealing God's glory. When the disciples misunderstand Jesus speaking about Lazarus' death, he speaks quite plainly with them. "Lazarus is dead" he says. And Jesus response here is a little odd at first glance. He rejoices at having stayed behind, at letting Lazarus die. He's happy! Why? For the sake of the disciples, that they might believe. They have believed in him from as early as his first miracle in Cana, but soon they will

be faced with a far more difficult task. They need to believe in a Christ who will die. Jesus wants them and all people to believe in him, and this miracle shows exactly what he will do. Yes, Jesus will die. But just as Lazarus has, he will rise again. Jesus will conquer death.

These two points, revealing the glory of God and causing even the most stubborn of hearts to believe, these should be enough to justify Jesus waiting for two days. But there's another point this text makes about why Jesus waited. He loved Lazarus.

The message Mary and Martha sent said as much: "Lord, the one you love is sick." But the word they used speaks only of brotherly love. Two verses later Jesus uses a different word for love – agape – which is an unconditional, selfless love. This is a love of action, of self-sacrifice, the sort of love that could lead someone to die for another. Jesus loves Martha, Mary and Lazarus not with a brotherly love, but with agape, with unconditional love. Yes, surely he could have acted immediately and saved Lazarus from death. Martha and Mary would not have had to go through mourning their brother's untimely demise. A lot of pain and heartache could have been avoided. But Jesus' eyes were set on higher things, and his love was greater than that.

His love for them was such that he wanted to ensure that they believed in him. Mary and Martha, and certainly the disciples also believed that if Jesus has been present when Lazarus was sick, he would not have died. They needed to believe that Jesus has power not just to heal sickness, but that he can overcome death. Lazarus' death, their death, your death, my death. They needed to understand this, just as we need to understand this. He cares not just for our present predicaments, but for the predicament of sin.

When I reflect now on the question of why Jesus waited to go to Lazarus, I find myself back at the beginning. Jesus loved Lazarus and all people unconditionally. Jesus is God and he had a plan for what was to come. God and the Son of God needed to be glorified through Lazarus' resurrection so that all might believe in him and through faith share in the life the Father gives through his Son.

So, maybe you're like me and you find it easier to trust if you know exactly what the plan is that you're trusting. Well, here it is: You need to understand that

Jesus' agape love is for you, just as much as it was for Lazarus and his sisters. That's the plan. That's the plan for everyone. It's the plan for our little church here, for the wider Christian church, it's the plan for everyone around the world. The plan is the Word – Scripture itself. It's the Spirit of God entering our minds through our ears and once again telling us that Jesus did not abandon Lazarus. He did not abandon Mary and Martha. He didn't even abandon the Israelites that wanted to stone him, and that would eventually crucify him.

The plan is to remind you again and again and again that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and that as we are in him and he is in us, so the Father is in us, and we are in him. You are not alone. The church is not alone. The very creator of the heavens and the earth, the incarnate God dwells within you, and even if you were to die, you would still live. Because just as Lazarus has risen, just as Christ has risen, we too have and shall receive a risen eternal life.

Amen.