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John 11:1-53

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Where is God When it Hurts?

I. Everyone hurts.

It's being reported that approximately 5,000 people an hour paid their respects to the late Ronald Reagan in the Rotunda at the Capital building last week. Close to 200,000 people waited in line for 5, 6, 7 hours to see him. He was obviously loved, yet it was recently told that while the former President had passed through thousands of crowded places, he still felt alone whenever his wife, Nancy, left the room. What a bittersweet story, now that he has left her world. But how touching to see so many people, great and small, far and near, gather round the family in support and love.

But what about our world – the real one – where our hurts and loneliness go entirely unnoticed? We don't get tributes or community leaders or sometimes even friends during our struggles. How are we supposed to pull through? How are we supposed to navigate the dark, stormy times in our lives?

Of course many of us would rather just avoid the subject of pain altogether. It seems easier to turn on the tube than consider our broken relationships, lost jobs, lost loved ones. It seems easier to put on a happy face for everyone, like nothing is wrong. And our pain and frustration end up festering quietly just beneath the surface. Does that sound at all familiar? Or maybe your hurts have reached levels you can't conceal; but you can't seem to heal them either. Your best efforts, your best friends, even your prayers seem to fall flat on their face.

It's at these times that we cry out, "Where are you, God?!" And we're not alone. Even King David (the "man after God's own heart") asked in Psalm 13, "**How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?**" In our text today we'll find more of the same. Fortunately we'll find answers, too. So if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to John 11. This will be a familiar story to many of you, but a new take on it, I think.

II. People are frail.

"Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick'" (v. 1-3).

John wastes no time in relating the problem to us. A man has fallen ill, but not just any man, and not just any illness. In the past, Lazarus and his two sisters had

gone to great lengths to show their devotion to Christ. They'd given up not only their hearts, but their kitchen, home, money, and probably their reputations for Him. And this Lazarus, the one Jesus loved, was now sick, probably very sick. Now some scholars think the sisters were not asking for help since their message was only a brief statement; but although there may not be an explicit plea, people, especially people in the days before e-mails and cell phones, wouldn't send a messenger without good reason. Any illness was serious in those days. No, certainly Lazarus was suffering and his family suffered with him. But there were no drug stores, no vaccines, and no emergency rooms. There was, however, Jesus. And here's his reply.

III. God is glorious.

"But when Jesus heard it, He said, 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.' Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was" (v. 4-6).

If you already know how this story ends, it's easy to skip ahead to the happy ending and ignore these verses. But it's worth noting that Jesus did not come to the rescue. He stayed away! Didn't He care? Or worse, did He bring this about for His own benefit, for good publicity? These are tough questions, but fair ones.

I have two answers. First of all, it's entirely possible that Lazarus had already died once the messenger had arrived. Jesus would have known, then, that waiting wouldn't make the situation any worse. In fact, the delay may have allowed Him to restore/heal more than Lazarus, alone.

Second, and more importantly, we need to know that God is not responsible for Lazarus' condition. Our sin brought sickness and death into this world. Even though Jesus said this is "**for the glory of God**" (v. 4), I think He was explaining God's personality, not His purpose. What's the difference? A God concerned with public redemption, not a god concerned with public relations. God doesn't need good P.R. It is true that God made us to give Him glory, but here it seems that His act is not in order to get glory; but rather His act is glorious simply because He is glorious. One commentator put it this way, "...here as elsewhere the glory of God is not his praise, but his activity." So God's not playing fast and loose with Lazarus' life. No! It's His perfect nature to take what we have broken and make it better than new. He wasn't seeking glory here, He was being Who He is; being

glorious.

IV. Sometimes we walk in the Light.

“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 seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?’ Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.’ This He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.’ The disciples therefore said to Him, ‘Lord if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.’ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.’ Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him’” (vv. 7-16).

There’s something scary about the dark. It’s universal. But I was determined to rear a boy who wasn’t afraid of the dark. I wouldn’t startle or chase him at night. We’d have fun and explore dark rooms. And we’d never joke about monsters. It made no difference! Toby couldn’t explain it, but one day he looked down our darkened hallway, then he’d look back at us with wide eyes and say, “What’s happening?” He was afraid of the dark. Of course we adults are more rational about this, but I know everyone’s had those moments of squeamish uncertainty and fear. And we’ve all sighed or laughed with the confidence that light brings. So what image could better inspire the disciples’ confidence and courage than the Light of Christ!

But now Jesus tells them plainly that Lazarus is truly dead. Better still, they’re intentionally returning to Judea and probable persecution by the Jews. Fearing for their lives, it is a dark and troubling time for them. So Jesus declares, “Hey guys! I’m your nightlight. I may not be on this dark earth long – just ‘twelve hours of the day,’ but while I am here, you have nothing of consequence to fear.” While Jesus, the Light of the World, was with them, His plans would not fail; His life would not be taken; nor would these men stumble.

But we don’t have Jesus sitting in our living room. And in the fear and pain of our inevitable suffering or sin, it can be awfully hard to see His Light, can’t it? How can we hope in such times? How can we cope? So far, this is an interesting story, but where is God when we hurt? Anyone who is wise will consider this question. And anyone who has lived a

little has already asked it. Where is He when we hurt? The rest of this chapter offers four answers, whether or not Jesus Christ is a real character in your story, a real person in your life.

V. Sometimes the Light is hard to see.

A. Where is God when we hurt?

HE’S LISTENING

“So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house. Martha therefore said to Jesus, ‘Lord if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother shall 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; he who believes in Me shall live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world’” (vv. 17-27).

Where is God when we hurt? He’s listening. Obviously there are other things going on here, but what stands out most to me is Jesus’ response to Martha. She levels a weighty but accurate charge at Jesus. “Where were you? You could have saved him!” But does He get defensive? Does He get frustrated? Does He get patronizing? No, He listens when we’re hurting.

But we have a responsibility in this, too. If He’s listening, what’s that tell us? We should be talking, or yelling, or crying, or something! What happens when you stub your toe, or a baby is born, or your team loses, or you fail your test? AAAAGH!! We cry out. It’s reflexive. Do you see how Mary’s action is contrasted with Martha’s – **“but Mary still sat in the house”** (v. 20)? Maybe she was too angry to talk to Jesus; maybe she was too guilty for feeling too angry at Him. Or maybe her heart was just too heavy with sadness and loss and loneliness. But Jesus was ready and willing and wanting to listen to all of it. So go before Him and vent like Martha did. Unload on God. Give Him both barrels. Open the floodgates. Too often we bottle it up because so few people ever listen with the love and acceptance of our Lord. Our hurt needs to be heard. And God knows this about us. He’s just waiting patiently for us to figure it out, too.

B. Where is God when we hurt?

HE’S LAMENTING

“And when she had said this, she went away, and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, ‘The Teacher is here, and is calling for you.’ And when she heard it, she arose quickly, and was coming to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into

the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in Spirit, and was troubled, and said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept. And so the Jews were saying, 'Behold how He loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have kept this man also from dying?'" (vv. 28-37).

Where is God when it hurts? He's lamenting. For whatever reasons Mary remained behind at first, she cannot stay away from her dear Savior any longer. Why? He cried. Now I'm no expert on crying, but I do know that there are two different kinds mentioned here. According to custom and culture, the Jews mourned (*klaio*) – ripping clothes, pounding their chest, wailing loudly, but feeling little. Jesus wept (*dakruo*) – shedding tears and showing little, but feeling everything. It is helpful when people listen and repeat your words. But it's healing when they actually hurt with you; when their eyes well up for your pain.

Have you seen the commercials for Sierra Mist soda? Usually a guy and a little dog seeking refreshment in the oddest of ways? One is particularly dear to me. This guy goes to his freezer on a blazing hot day. But he doesn't pull out ice cream or ice. He pulls out his boxers and shouts his way into them. "Yeah. It's kind of like that." says a voice. Well, my wife Kristin and I used to do that same thing with T-shirts during our humid, 3rd floor, non-AC, summer days in Massachusetts. I don't just sympathize with that guy in the commercial. I can actually feel what he feels! That's how God feels for our hurt. So, far from being absent when we hurt, God is most present, most evident in our pain. Because our story becomes His story; our pain is His pain; our tears are now His tears.

And much the same as His listening requires our talk, His lamenting requires our heart. If you're at all like me, you ignore your feelings; you cram them in back of your busy schedule or family demands. Grief and guilt and anger are exhausting, if not embarrassing. But hiding these only hurts us more and puts us deeper into the dark.

C. Where is God when we hurt?

HE'S MAKING LEMONADE

"Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Remove the stone.' Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench for he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not say to you, If you

believe, you will see the glory of God?' And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes and said, 'Father, I thank Thee that Thou heardest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.' And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'" (vv. 38-44).

If this were on TV, it would have to be the cliff-hanging season finale. These guys are in a graveyard, with a decomposing body; Jesus is in tears, amidst a crowd of less than friendly Jews. It's not looking real great! But we stay tuned 'til next season because we know it's going to work out somehow. But that's TV. If this were your life or mine, we'd be more likely to smell the stench than to hear His hope; to see all bad and no good. In the hardest of times, it's difficult to see or feel anything besides pain, including God.

So then what can we make of Jesus' confidence in verses 41-42? He obviously knew something that they did not. I mean, first of all He was thanking God! That can be a little off-putting in those darker moments. "I'm sorry you've lost everything, but remember that God is good!" And second, He was thanking God before the fact. Remember, Lazarus hadn't come out of the tomb yet. But instead of being trite or hollow, Jesus' confidence was uplifting. Why is that? It's because no matter what people can be like, God is sincere; He is Truth and He is love. That's both who He is, and what He does. So when we are hurting, God is making lemonade. No, this is not some cliché about happy thoughts or positive thinking (You know: "When life hands you lemons..."). What I mean is that God has a living, breathing, real, redeeming plan. Death and loss are devastating to us and He mourns with us, but they're only a detour to Him. Just part of His redeeming plan was to help Lazarus that day. The whole of God's plan is to help all of us, if we'll let Him!

D. Where is God when we hurt?

HE'S LIVED IT

"Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things which Jesus had done. Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, 'What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.' But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you take into

account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.’ Now this he did not say on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him” (vv. 45-53).

First of all, how cool is it that the Good News by which we are saved is such a good read, too! I love these final verses. John couldn't be more ironic. Caiaphas couldn't be more right and wrong! In plotting and prophesying the downfall of Christ, Caiaphas unwittingly hits on the surprising strategy of our Savior.

Caiaphas says, **“If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him....”** (v. 48). Too late! People everywhere were already curious or committed to Jesus Christ. Caiaphas says, **“...one man should die for the people... that the whole nation should not perish.”** (v. 50). Well that one man would die for their nation and more; and He would do so willingly. Caiaphas predicted that Jesus' death **“...might also gather together... the children of God who are scattered abroad.”** (v. 52). Boy did He! In fact, Jesus gathered together more children than Caiaphas could ever expect or even tolerate.

And what's more, Christ's surprising strategy becomes our foundation, a rock in our times of trouble. His painful plan is a source of strength. How? Because when we hurt, we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He has lived it! In fact, even as John wraps up this amazing account, we read that men are already plotting Jesus' demise; a demise actually alluded to by Lazarus' own death and resurrection. For Jesus was about to face a death the likes of which few have ever faced, and face it for reasons none of us could face – for your sin, my sin, your pain, and mine.

When you're going to fix your Ferrari (or Geo, in my case!), you want to take it to a mechanic, not your son's auto-shop class. When you're going to Hawaii, you want to fly with a pilot with experience. When you're going to AA, you want to talk to someone who's emptied a bottle before. And when you're going to fall apart, who else would you want as your Savior but He who has gone through all you have and more – willingly!

VI. It's often in our darkest times that God shines brightest.

I've got one of those handheld spotlights. Have you seen them? This one is super bright; like 8 gazillion candlepower. We used it to safely navigate the channel markers of San Luis Obispo Harbor in the middle of the night. It's so bright you can actually feel the heat as the beam passes over you, unless it's day. When it's day the light is no less bright, but it's much harder to see. And so it is sometimes for us and our God. God's lovingkindness always shines brightly on us, but we don't always see it – or look for it – until we're in the dark. Of course no one wants the hard times, the pain, but it's often in our darkest times that God shines brightest. Even King David saw God more clearly in his dark song, Psalm 13, verses 5-6 say, **“But I trust in Your unfailing love, my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord for He has been good to me.”**

And He's been good to you. Do you remember what God the Father did while His own Son suffered, alone on the cross? He listened to Jesus' cry, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” So He listens to you. He lamented Jesus' death as the earth shook and the day grew dark as night. So He laments for you. And three days later, He even made lemonade as His dead Son rose again, conquering sin and death once and for all. So He does for you. No hurt is too big, no sin is too bad; because it's often in our darkest times that God shines brightest. I hope you're listening. You know that He is.