

“If You Had Been Here” based on John 11:1-53, Psalm 130

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 26, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

“If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died.” From out of the depths of their pain, Martha and then Mary, call out to Jesus. They know that he has performed miracles, and yet he did not come when called. The story of Lazarus in John is one of lament, the frustration that we feel when it seems that the one who can deliver us – our God – does not seem to hear us in our plight, or in our suffering, including cries from those we consider to be just, or good.

In 1976, a woman named Judith Marie suffered an aneurysm and her 11-year-old son James, could only watch as she was taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital in Ohio. While there, she would have two more hemorrhagic strokes. She was half paralyzed, half-blind, and unable talk with her son when he visited her soon after.

Judith was a woman of deep religious faith, believing in Jesus, and the family went to church once or twice a week, or more. But her sudden illness, and the reaction of her church, meant her husband and son stopped going, and James grew up to be an agnostic, spiritual, but not religious, and hostile to Christianity.

James and his stepfather were abandoned by the members of their church and some family. You see, Judith’s outward piety and goodness, followed by seemingly out of nowhere strokes didn’t make sense. This left them to cast judgement, that, somehow, she deserved her paralysis. Some unconfessed sin may have been the reason God did this to her. Judgement allowed them to rationalize their withholding of support, because they did not want to be judged in a similar way, for helping an apparently sinful family. James and his stepfather’s decision to leave the church, likely only confirmed their suspicions.

This is similar to our reading today, in which, pious Judeans were with Martha and Mary, grieving with them the loss of their brother Lazarus, knowing they were loved by Jesus. And so, they question why Jesus didn’t come sooner. He had healed others and surely could have healed Lazarus too, if he had just come right away. Some recognized the grief on Jesus’s face, as he seemed to mourn. But the others, as noted, questioned Jesus and his absence.

So, why did Jesus wait? Why does the Psalmist also lament about God not listening? This is one of the greatest challenges to the faith of many who believe in God, and believe God is all powerful, all just, and all good. These are three things which, in cases like these, lead us to think that this is not possible. How can God be all good, if bad things happen to faithful people? How can God be all just, if the wicked go unpunished? How can God be all powerful, if evil is allowed? From our perspective, God could balance two, but not all three of these things, yet, we ascribe to God all three.

John’s story makes clear that Martha, Mary and Lazarus are not like everyone else. They are ones whom Jesus especially loves, much like God’s love for the Israelites. They are chosen, just as God had chosen the Israelites to be a favored nation. Yet, Babylon took the leaders of the Northern Kingdom of Israel into exile, and after Assyria defeated Babylon, they never returned. Likewise, Assyria took the leaders of Judah into exile, and though many from the Southern

Kingdom returned, after Persia defeated Assyria, the former glory of an independent nation in God's presence, was never fully realized again.

When Jesus came, the people of Judah, the Jews, were living in the province of Judea, and had sisters and brothers in the faith living in great numbers in Galilee, but these provinces were ruled over by the Romans who worshiped many gods. The Messiah, it was popular to believe, would liberate them from Roman oppression and restore the nation to its glory, and restore God's presence in the temple.

That young boy James eventually moved to Michigan to be with his biological father and a stepmother. They also were a churchgoing family, and the pastor of this church did restore in James at least some understanding of the faith but could not undo the damage of church hurt. This was especially difficult since James knew his mother, who recovered some, was still mostly paralyzed and remained a part of her church, even as they continued to judge her for superficial things. James found it incomprehensible that a loving God, something he could begin to grasp again as a concept, would punish his mother of all people. It led him to take up the mindset that everything is chance, so it 's up to us and only us to help each other.

I have no answer for why God delays, why Jesus delayed in today's gospel reading, and why God allows doubt to fester. I can only guess about this. Just like we can look at the death of a loved one and guess by trying to make sense of it. We try to see some blessing that others might miss. Perhaps, we might see the debilitating illness of a parent and rationalize that their combative nature was now impaired also, allowing them and their children to restore a relationship. But there are many cases where the same illness, never mends a relationship or makes it worse. What do we say then in our wisdom? What purpose was there for this?

We can look at the timeline in our story, and imagine that even if Jesus had left immediately, he still would not have gotten back in time to save Lazarus, who would have died anyway. He and the apostles were at the Jordan River, a day or two away by foot from Bethany. When he got there after a two-day delay, Lazarus was dead four days. Still, if anyone deserved a prompt response from Jesus, wouldn't it have been Lazarus, Mary & Martha whom he loved? We can look also at the chosen people of Israel and Judah, whom God loved and called, and wonder why God did not respond to them before allowing them to be taken in exile.

In the face of the pandemic, which marked its three-year anniversary this month, we can try to rationalize good that came out of it, despite more than 1 million deaths in the US. There are some good things that have come out of this pandemic, but did God need to allow these loved ones to die for us to make some changes? Did he? Especially since many of these are already coming undone as we resume life as it was before. These are real challenges to our faith and our understanding of God, and to just ignore them doesn't help as we live in an increasingly secular culture that rejects Jesus, and the faith that brings us here to church each week.

James grew up to be a rock star, going by the name of Maynard James Keenan, the lead singer, for the progressive heavy metal bands known as "Tool" and "A Perfect Circle." Keenan wrote a song about his mother for "A Perfect Circle," released in 2000. In this song, he openly attacks her faith and Jesus, blaming them for her plight, asking why she never abandoned her faith. On

the strength of this song as their first single, "Judith," their album, "Mer de Noms," or sea of names, opened at number four on the billboard charts. It was the highest showing on the charts for a debut rock album.

In 2006, Tool released its fourth full-length album, and it debuted at number one on the charts. It was titled, "10,000 days," a reference to the time that Judith lived with her paralysis, before she died in 2003. It was more than 27 years after her strokes back in 1976. The album has two songs about her death: The first is set at her bedside when she dies, and the second is set with him coming out of that room and at her funeral. They blend into each other, creating one long, more than 17-minute tribute to her.

In the first song, "Wings for Marie," he says, "*You believed in movements none could see,*" a reference to his mother Judith Marie's faith in God, and her belief in her son. He calls himself broken, and says he fell at the hands of those movements, which he wouldn't see, and adds: "*yet, it was you who prayed for me. So what have I done to be a son to an angel? What have I done to be worthy?*" Adding that she, quote: "*didn't have a life, but surely saved one. See? I'm alright, Now it's time for us to let you go.*"

In these moments, we are left to wonder aloud, "If you had only been here Lord," just as Martha and Mary did, and believe that everything could have been different. Like Martha and Mary, and like the Psalmist, we could fully confront God with it, or we can pull back, like Keenan, and assume that God is not there at all.

In the second song, "10,000 days (Wings for Marie, Part 2)," he talks of the rationalizations made by her church members, romanticizing that they are the "saved" ones, who "*rise to the height of our halos,*" as he put it. But none, he says, had really been there in the suffering of trials and tribulations, and now, in the arms of the savior, like his mom.

He calls them the collective Judas and says that his mother bore the light of the divine, and he promises to let his little light shine, as a gift from her, to guide her safely home. He says that she is the one, if anyone, like Martha and Mary, or like the Israelites, who have the right to say, "*fetch me the Spirit, the Son, and the Father, tell them their pillar of faith has ascended. It's time now, my time now! Give me my...Give me my wings!*"

Like any good lament from scripture he confesses, saying, "*Set as I am in my ways and my arrogance, burden of proof tossed upon the believers*" and says she was his witness, his eyes, his evidence, Judith Marie, who loved him, "*the unconditional one.*"

Like the lament in Psalm 130, it ends on a moment of hope, returning to the first song, asking her to tell God, quote: "*I never lived a lie, never took a life, but surely saved one,*" and he leaves room for her prayers to work, and someday to bring him to faith, by singing, "*Hallelujah, it's time for you to bring me home.*"

Nearly 20 years since her death, we have no reason to believe yet, that her prayers have been answered, as he still rejects Jesus, openly and often mockingly in new side projects. It's not unlike some of those who saw Lazarus raised. Indeed, even after Jesus raised Lazarus, some went to the leaders and resolved to kill him.

And so, it was at Passover, shortly after this incredible miracle, that Jesus was arrested. The one whom John called the Word of God, one with God, who is God, who came down to be the true temple of God fully in our human flesh, was crucified on a Roman cross and died for our sake, and then rose again for us too. This is so that we might be temples individually and collectively, empowered by the Holy Spirit to share in Jesus's work, as ministers of reconciliation, reaching out, so that all might know the love of God in us and through us as witnesses, as Judith was.

John's telling of this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead echoes scripture's laments, and the lament formula of addressing God, complaining to God, confessing what is true, and then making a petition, before praising God in the end, regardless. Martha and Mary address Jesus, complain to him, confess who he really is. They ask him for help, for which we as readers see the outcome, and certainly, there is plenty of reason to praise Jesus.

What we see here is the point of John's gospel, beginning to end, and quite frankly, the point of the New Testament, namely that the good news is not about us rationalizing how to balance God's attributes or balance our good or bad deeds. It's about seeing God's love, justice, and power revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. What we get is not an answer to the rightful frustrations we have at times when God does things or doesn't act as we think God ought to act, and it makes no sense to us.

Instead, the good news gives us permission to complain to God in Jesus and through the Spirit, using lament because we are told that our God is not distant, but near to us. To the complaint, "If only you had been here, Lord," John says the Lord is here, and that our Lord mourns with us – Jesus approaches the tomb and he wept. The verb John uses for weeping is different from the one for Martha and Mary, which is a loud wailing. No, the word for Jesus's weeping is one for silent tears, running down your face.

I do not believe Jesus's tears are simply for Lazarus, nor as some scholars argue, do I think that they are for his himself, based on his awareness of his own coming death. I believe that when he weeps, he weeps for the grief he sees in his friends, Martha and Mary, struggling in faith, when they feel as though he has not responded to their needs, and the grief we feel when we think God has abandoned us as well. Yet, the tears on his face are the tears of God, and the one true God is a god who empathizes with us.

My sisters and brothers, it isn't called good news because everything works out for us, but because it proclaims that in the pain and sorrow of this life, God never leaves us. The songs, "Wings for Marie" and "10,000 days," are a form of lament, from a man who as a boy seems to have been circled by believers, who had lost the art of lament. In many Christian circles, we see people put on a good face of piety to say everything is going to work out, rather than complain to God about what is wrong in this world.

The complaints of our laments lead us to confess our sin or our faith and praise God, igniting our ability to endure. Lament frees us to participate in God's work in this world to make it better and see what is good now, even if the fullness of what we hope for may still be far away.

These two songs, though written by someone who has taken another path in his faith, served to bolster my faith, when thirteen years after his mother died, my mother also died. You see, my mother also suffered a severe stroke, that left her partly paralyzed, unable to talk with me, as she had my whole life, except for a few words.

From that stroke to her death, she lived 1,000 days, exactly. Even before her stroke in 2013, I thought of her in this song, because of her amazing faith and doubters around her. Now, with that remarkable coincidence I can sing the song alongside Keenan making it about my own mother, saying *"1,000 days in the fire is long enough, you're going home."*

"In this world," as John's gospel quotes Jesus a few chapters later at the end of John 16, "you are going to have troubles, but take heart, for I have overcome the world." Friends, our faith is not meant for us to make up answers, or blindly believe, but to engage in our suffering and the suffering of this world, just as our God did in Jesus, sharing the fullness of our humanity, to be for us Emmanuel, "God with us." This is our hope.

All of you, take heart – know that you are not alone, but God is with you and God loves you. We may not know why things happen as they do, and sin and death still haunt us, but have the courage to lament, like the Psalmist and like Martha and Mary. Because the one who is the resurrection and the life shed tears for our struggle, and right now, he is pursuing you with love and new life. Amen.