

Today is the first day of passiontide, we're on the final stretch of the journey to the cross.

Throughout this season we have been reading big chunks of John's Gospel is very different from the others.

The writer of John has a particular theme that everything he writes point to, every passage has a deeper meaning than just telling where Jesus went and what he did, there are no throwaway lines.

The story begins with the message sent by Lazarus' sisters, "Lord, behold, he for whom you love is sick." They didn't even have to say who it was. They were such close friends that they knew Jesus would know who they were talking about. But this closeness makes what happens next very hard to understand.

Jesus waits. He doesn't seem to be moved at all by the information that his good friend is ill. He downplays the importance of the message. He says,

"This sickness is not to death,
but for the glory of God,
that God's Son may be glorified by it."

That's not the kind of message that would make Lazarus feel any better. The idea that Lazarus' sickness would provide a sermon illustration for Jesus must have blown Mary and Martha away. It was as if Jesus said, "Lazarus is sick. So what, it's no big deal. It's just something that God will use for his own glory." And Jesus waits for two days before beginning the two day journey to Bethany.

Can you imagine the anxiety of Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters? They love Jesus, they have been traveling with him, working with, and probably funding Jesus and his ministry. They have seen Jesus heal many other people and seen wonderful things. Now their

brother Lazarus, Jesus' friend, is ill. Let us pause for a moment and remember that in the first century, in Palestine, illness was quite serious, there were no antibiotics, and illness, more often than not, preceded death.

This was serious, and they knew that Jesus had it within him to heal Lazarus. Can you imagine their disappointment when Jesus says that he will wait to visit Lazarus? "Wait?!" the sisters may have shouted, "He will die!"

And Lazarus does die. It's heartbreaking; he dies. We need to really get our hearts and minds around this fact. Mary and Martha are living in a pre-Resurrection world. Death is death, the absolute end of all things.

When we look closely at this text in John, we find no real explanation for why Jesus waited. Theologians have speculated but have come up with several different theories.

It's a huge temptation to move too quickly to an easy answer, but the Bible is full of unanswered questions and we're meant to wrestle with them.

Whatever the reasons the sisters of Lazarus didn't appreciate Jesus' attitude. They were looking for Jesus to be the kind of friend who drops everything to come stand with them in their pain. They didn't want a lecture, they wanted someone to suffer with them—to help them.

But Jesus didn't drop what he was doing. Jesus didn't respond to the emergency note. He didn't rush to the bedside of the sick man or to the aid of the concerned sisters. John says, "When therefore he heard that he was sick, he stayed two days in the place where he was."

True, when Jesus finally stops whatever he's doing and gets to the cemetery Jesus pulls off a spectacular resuscitation. At Jesus' cry, "Lazarus arise! Unbind him! Let him go!" Lazarus strides forth from the tomb! All's well that ends well, we say.

Most theologians will tell you that this raising of Lazarus is a foretelling of Jesus' resurrection. As dead Jesus lay in the tomb for three days, so Lazarus. OK. So...why did Jesus wait three days in the tomb before his resurrection?

I believe not only that God is love, and that God is entirely for us. I believe Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. But why the wait? Why these empty spaces, this wasted time, hopeless despair, unanswered questions, and delayed salvation if God is God for us?

And the Bible is full of stories exactly like it: The Israelites in slavery for 400 years, Joseph sitting in prison, David on the run from King Saul

When Jesus does finally come to Lazarus, the sisters and the village are in full mourning. Martha greets Jesus and gives him a piece of her mind "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I wonder what was going through her head.

It's one of the greatest questions for us as believers and it's one of the things that the world struggles most about our faith. Lord if you had been here

Where is God in all the suffering in the world? In a global pandemic that has killed thousands, collapsed economies and brought the world to its knees.

If God loves us (and he does) and God is all powerful (and he is) why is this happening? There are no quick answers.

Ours is not a prosperity Gospel, God doesn't promise wealth and health, I don't believe God causes suffering but if the above is true then He allows suffering to happen and that's hard to reconcile.

At this point, we are met with what is the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept,"

Just two words filled with the most intense power. Jesus wept. It's an important point. Weeping comes from deep empathy and grief. Twice in this passage we are told that Jesus is deeply moved, or disturbed in his spirit. Jesus is not some all-seeing, distant, stoic God in a great cosmic drama, manipulating our lives like pawns in a chess game. Our God is a feeling, empathizing God. Jesus acts out of this empathy, So when we're asking the question about why the waiting, why God didn't act earlier, we have to factor in the nature of God which we see in Jesus' weeping with his friends.

And it is right there in that hard, desolate place of loss and grief that Jesus speaks life. "Lazarus, come out!" Even here, we see that death having the last word is not in God's plan.

Each of us have those moments of wondering where God was in a time of trial or loss, if not now then at another time in our lives.

We all have our Lazarus, whether it's a real person or a situation where hope died for us. All of us have wondered at God's apparent departure. But sometimes, in that area of wondering, Jesus shows up, even after the death and loss.

We may not recognize God's empathic presence with us, but we know his nature and we can trust, somehow, that he is present with us, weeping.

It's the waiting for Jesus that is the lesson from Mary and Martha today. Even though all hope is lost – Lazarus has died – they still wait for what, they do not know, even though they're furious with him

and don't understand And it is in the midst of this waiting that God moves.

God moves in God's time, wherever we are in life, whatever our own Lazarus situation is, God isn't done yet, our story isn't complete. We don't understand why we are where we are, why this is happening, we wrestle with God, with so much that we don't understand, we get angry, that's ok there's plenty of precedent in Scripture for that, but we wrestle and we wait.

Jesus sits with us in the waiting and he weeps when we weep

And we trust that God **WILL** bring hope and resurrection, we are heading towards the passion knowing that more pain is likely to come before we are through, there are tough times ahead but Easter Sunday is coming, we are an Easter people and alleluia will once again be our song.