

From “Miss” to “This” (John 11:17-32)

We’re exploring the theme of Re-directing sorrow and disappointment during the Lenten Season this year. As we noted last week, there’s been plenty of this come our way over this past year and Christ followers are not immune from these experiences. So what do we do with our sorrow and disappointment? Rightly we are directed to Jesus who is the source of our provision and hope. But what happens when it’s Jesus who has disappointed us? What do we do when heaven seems silent?

That’s why we’re in the 11th chapter of John today where we’ve heard a portion of the story we know very well as the raising of Lazarus. This was an astounding event and I imagine it rendered those who witnessed it speechless—initially to be sure; shortly thereafter it was likely all they could talk about. We typically read this story paying attention to how Jesus responded to the situation. This is what John intended for us to see and grasp—Jesus is the main figure and what he did further revealed his identity and power. In this account we see Jesus leading thought, first with his disciples (in a portion we did not read), then with Martha followed by her sister Mary. He was preparing them for something beyond their expectation. And though this is a lengthy story, it’s a quick read and we’re eager to get to the glorious end.

But, what was this like for the sisters as it unfolded? What might have been going through their minds as Jesus failed to respond right away to the need they reported? There are a number of days in this story where the outcome hung in the balance. We don’t know how long it took for the messengers bearing the news of Lazarus’ condition to locate Jesus. We do know that once Jesus received the news, he remained where he was for another couple of days. On the face of it, this seems odd, especially since John makes sure we know early on in the account that Jesus loves this family—they are close to him, so why the delay? By the time Jesus does arrive he heard that Lazarus died four days prior.

By their initial comments to Jesus, it seems that the sisters had resigned themselves to the idea that this was a missed opportunity. They had clung to a window of hope while they waited for Jesus to arrive, but their hope dwindled as Lazarus worsened. You can see the disappointment as they both separately say the same thing: Had you been here, my brother would not have died. They had likely discussed what some of the bystanders said: could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? The sisters were resigned in their grief and disappointed in Jesus.

Missed opportunity is likely the kindest assessment they could agree upon. And as we reflect on their story, let’s understand first, that their love and desire for the well-being of their brother was not wrong or misplaced. Second, their sense that Jesus could make a difference was correct. Third, their disappointment in Jesus is understandable—why he failed to intervene must have bewildered them. And fourth, their sorrow in the outcome is appropriate. We have, perhaps, experienced these dynamics ourselves in similar circumstances—maybe when someone close to us has died, or in other challenging situations where Jesus seemed not to have showed up that we chalk up to a missed opportunity in our assessment.

Sorrow begins to morph into resentment when we shift from: God could have done what we hoped for, to God should have done what we hoped for. Well-intentioned advice tries to mitigate resentment by suggesting the presence of a higher purpose in the cause of our sorrow that is hidden from us. And while a case for this might be made theologically, this is cold comfort in the stark reality of our sorrow and its consequences. Experience, and even the biblical record tells us that miracles are few and far between, though we hold out hope for an exception to the rule. When we fasten ourselves to the missed opportunity of our unrequited desire, we get stuck in the bog of failure—either our failure to recognize what was required of us to merit the outcome of our hope, or God’s failure to come through as expected which may lead us to suspect that God might not be what we thought or worse. It can come down to I’m no good, or God’s not good, or perhaps there is no God.

So, how do we avoid getting stuck in life through our experience of a missed opportunity? I’m using this term inclusively to cover a variety of experiences that would qualify as times when, in our estimation, God failed to show—and these moments vary by degree, but

are the same in type. I'd like to suggest five ways we can redirect our disappointment towards a way forward that can keep us from getting stuck. These aren't in any particular order, they're not sequential, they won't all apply to every situation—see if one or two of them might point you in a new direction, beginning here:

1) A missed opportunity doesn't mean only opportunity. It's possible for us to get so wrapped up in the present moment/opportunity, especially when it's something in which we're heavily invested, that when it fails to gel—when God doesn't seem to show up—we believe: that was it, one chance and now it's gone. On the one hand, we can't necessarily assume that God wasn't, or isn't still at work in it. God may well be in it working towards an end we can't yet see or realize. Trust God for outcomes. On the other hand, one missed opportunity doesn't mean it was the only one. God has unlimited resources and time to pursue a range of opportunities with you still. Trust, and remain available.

2) A missed opportunity doesn't have to mean that God is finished with that moment, idea, or opportunity. It may have been the right idea at the wrong time or place—a change in time or place might yet yield the outcome for which we hope. There may well be new possibilities latent in what we think was a miss that will emerge from within that original moment or event. This was exactly what transpired in the case of Lazarus. A new and completely different possibility was going to emerge from that moment, one that his sisters would not have anticipated.

3) Consider that our faith is not contractual, but covenantal. We will miss out on the substance of our faith journey when we view our commitment to Christ as transactional, that is to say: I do this, and God does that. The writer of Psalm 73 got tripped up on this as he listed all the ways the wicked in his day prospered. They were adorned with pride and clothed with violence, he wrote, sinning with impunity amassing wealth seemingly without a care in the world. Verse 13 captures the thought that plagued him: "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments—he must have written this on a Monday. Essentially he's telling God, "I've been holding up my end, but you haven't held up yours." But then, he has a moment of clarity in the Sanctuary of God, and he realizes his benefit: he lives in God's presence. "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory...It is good to be near God."

God relates to us in the form of a covenant, not a contract. God has promised that we are never alone—Jesus reinforced it: I am with you always. In all things, God is with us. More than this, God is for us and provides for us through all of life's circumstances: good and bad, joy and sorrow, plenty and want. We have no guarantee of a problem free life, but there is the promise of God with us in that life. There is always a way forward, and God is committed to our finding it, which is why Jesus' call to discipleship is to follow him—he knows the way.

4) Building on what we briefly touched on earlier, our hope is based on what God is actually doing and not in what we think God should be doing. Reflecting on missed opportunities can reveal gaps in our perceptions or expose misplaced ideas about God. We may have inadvertently settled for a packaged idea of God who operates in what we conceive to be a predictable system. We get rattled when God fails to perform as anticipated—it upsets our faith system. In a nutshell, that describes the problem Jesus presented to the religious leaders of his day. Jesus revealed a God who worked beyond the confines of their packaged idea. He still does, and when we bump up against a God beyond our imagination, we suddenly discover that we have made an idol of our idea of God—we've limited God to working within our understanding, we have made God in our image. Facing this, we have a choice to make. Either we protect the mold encasing our idea of God and keep Jesus away from it, or we get out of the idol-making business and discover God anew. You see, God is not restrained by our ideas of God. What God is after is the formation of people led by the Spirit of Christ into the limitless expanse of God's love that breaks through the barriers of social constructs to bless, redeem, and delight in God's goodness pervading creation restoring it by grace to its rightful place. What we call a missed opportunity might more be the call to let go of what we think God should be doing and join in with what God is actually doing.

5) Truth is truth regardless of the source, and this little nugget comes by way of Orson Welles who once said, "The ending you get depends on where you stop the story." Martha and Mary stopped the story with the death of their brother. But Jesus had a different ending in mind. Perhaps you've stopped your story of faith with a missed opportunity as its end. It need not stop there. Let it play out—there's more to come. It may not be as dramatic as the end of this story in John chapter 11, but it can be every bit as satisfying. Let your trust ride on Jesus—follow him—and discover the end He has in mind. AMEN