

Four Desperate Days in Bethany  
John 11:1-6, 17, 39

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs  
Salem United Church of Christ  
December 1, 2019

*When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Jn. 11:17*

Four desperate days in Bethany describe the Advent we are going through now in real time.

The Advent we are in now is not a season of candles, carols, traditions, shopping, and preparing for Christmas. There is a place for all of that, of course, but the candles, carols, traditions, shopping, and all the rest may mask the deeper Advent we are actually going through.

The deeper Advent we are experiencing is a season of anguish and uncertainty, and we have no idea when it will end. The situation is this. We have prayed to God for help. We are now waiting for God to help. In the meantime, we are wondering why God hasn't helped already, and we are fearing, perhaps, that the time is getting short and it may be too late even for God to be of much help.

Put the story from John 11 alongside your life and I will show you what I mean.

*Like the sisters Mary and Martha, we have asked Jesus for help.*

Mary and Martha believed in Jesus wholeheartedly, and looked upon him as a heaven-sent friend. Mary is the one who surprised everyone in a room one day by publicly showing him deep devotion, anointing him from an alabaster jar of perfume, wetting his feet with her tears, and drying them with her hair (Lk. 7:37-39). Martha, too, in her own way, gave him what she could. She opened her home to him one day and had it full of guests to hear Jesus and his teaching (Lk. 10:38-42). These two women believed in Jesus ever so deeply and ever so wonderfully.

Now their brother, Lazarus, a good friend of Jesus, has fallen sick. He seems to be, already early in the story, quite poorly off, for there is no record of him saying anything or responding to his sisters in any way. Mary and Martha, trusting Jesus as they do – trusting in his ability, his concern, and his friendship – send for Jesus right away, believing he can and will help them and their brother in their hour of need.

That much of the story is descriptive of our lives and our prayers. We have problems all our own, and we have sent for Jesus. We have prayed over health concerns, family troubles, duties difficult to perform, momentous decisions just in the offing, and all kinds of things that have hold of us in a sickening way. We've prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus." We've prayed, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus." We've used our prayers to send for Jesus the way Mary and Martha sent for him long ago.

*Like the sisters Mary and Martha, we now wait inexplicably long for our prayers to be answered.*

Just about 60 years ago, I cut my right hand rather badly. We won't go into the back story of how and why it happened! The wound was deep and bleeding profusely. My mother called a neighbor of ours, "Sunny" Tessoroff. (I don't quite remember, but I think her real first name was Lima.) She was a retired nurse and lived no more than a mile and a half from us; she was just a few farms away, up our road and then down another. She came right away. Mother called her and she did not delay.

Jesus made Mary and Martha wait. They sent for him, but he did not drop everything to come to them the way Sunny Tessoroff came when my mother called. Jesus made Mary and Martha wait and wait and wait. The whole thing was really inexplicable. Jerusalem, where Jesus was, was only two miles from where they were in Bethany. Just two miles! He could have been at Lazarus' side in 40 minutes. But it took him 4 days to get there.

We can only imagine what was going through their minds as they waited. Perhaps they thought of the story of Gideon from way back in the Old Testament. Gideon once had a question for God and asked it one night in prayer. God answered him right away the next morning. He tried it again the very next night, and it was the same. An evening prayer and a morning answer. Mary and Martha saw God in Jesus; they believed in him that much. They must have been wondering why God wasn't answering them swiftly the way Gideon was answered. The sisters had to have been wondering what was taking Jesus so blasted long.

This kind of waiting is the Advent we are in now. We are not waiting for Jesus to be born. We are waiting for the Jesus we know has been born to act in our lives now with healing help. We are waiting for him to answer our prayers. For some of our prayers the wait has been so excruciatingly long that we now wonder if an answer will ever come. That is Advent now, and everything is at stake. It is not just candles and decorations; it is life itself; it is faith itself. What is taking God so long? Will God come to help? Can God even be of help?

*Like the sisters Mary and Martha, we may feel anger at the Lord for the delay.*

The sisters are both quite put out with Jesus and they do not hold back when it comes to letting him know once he finally arrives. Mary gives Jesus the cold shoulder. Gone is the day she sat at his feet listening to him teach while she let her sister do the work; she won't even go out to meet him now. Martha, never shy about speaking her mind, lets Jesus have it when she sees him. She does not bother to greet him; she just lays into him: "If you would have been here, my brother would not have died." Mary comes around eventually, but says the same thing: "If you would have been here, my brother would not have died."

The sisters' seething had been brewing for all those four days. They had measured it out. Forty minutes would have covered the two miles from Jerusalem to Bethany. But it took Jesus four days and left them with a dead brother. Mary and Martha spent their Advent – their period of waiting for Jesus – angry and getting angrier.

Advent might make more sense to us if we practiced Mary's and Martha's example. Our relationship with God might have more reality to it if we followed the advice of Ellen Griswald's father. When you watch *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* again this season you will hear

Ellen's father say to Cousin Eddie, "Quit being so darn polite, Ed!" Maybe we should quit being so darn polite in our prayers and take Jesus by the collar instead.

What is taking you so long?

Surely you could have had an answer for me by the morning!

It can't be more than a 40 minute walk from heaven to here!

Why are you making me wait?

If you do not hurry there it will be too late!

Trust God's love enough to know you cannot break it. Be real in your prayers. Be honest. Be forthright. Open up to God and let your prayers be a real conduit of the frustration you feel. That can make for a real Advent season, authentic in every way, and not one decorated over with a feigned faith.

Mary's and Martha's wait for the arrival of Jesus to help them in their need was inexplicably long but it was not in vain. Jesus came to Bethany and worked his wonders. What he did was beyond what the sisters could have choreographed ahead of time.

It will be the same for you. We can't choreograph it. We can't compress it into a ceremony with special candles and special hymns. We can't guarantee it will happen in four days' time, four weeks' time, or four months' time. The Advent you are in is indefinite and cannot be hurried. It can only be waited through. But it can be waited through in trust. God hasn't forgotten you. God hasn't fallen out of love with you. God hasn't lost the ability to heal or to help or to make all things new. Wait for the one who can be trusted, and trust in the one for whom you wait.