

**Church of the Beatitudes  
United Church of Christ**

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**“Never place a period  
where God has placed a comma”**

| Gracie Allen |



God is still speaking,

**UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST**



**SERMON**

**“Out of the Depths”  
Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer  
March 9, 2008**

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**Scripture: John 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33-45**

We had a wonderful and successful book sale here last weekend. I know I walked away with new reading material to add to my pile, I might add. Reading material for all that spare time that I have. Many people worked long and hard to make that happen, and I thank all of them. Now, out of curiosity, how many of you bought books? Good. How many of you went home and opened up one of the books and began reading at chapter 11?

Of course you didn't. Stories have a beginning and an end. Stories build from each carefully told scene and conversation. Stories have details, texture, and color. Stories have absences: there are some things that are not told, some events that are left out, better told later or not at all.

Whoever wrote the Gospel of John is telling a story. Whether it was John or the beloved disciple, or someone else, it is many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and a story is being told. John, Chapter One, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” And if you get past that first page of the book without being too confused or turned off, you begin to hear the story that many call the Book of Signs. We heard several of those stories these past few weeks in our Lenten journey: Nicodemus and being born anew, the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus talking about living water, healing a man blind from birth, and now, raising a friend from the dead. It is a real page-turner this Book of Signs and if we had read just a few more verses, we would have overheard a plot to kill Jesus was afoot.

Many stories begin with ‘Once upon a time’. Once upon a time there was a beginning to time and creation. At some point in the future many believe that there will be a culmination of God's purposes in creation, an end time. But in-between the beginning and the end, there are many different kinds of moments.

At any moment in our world, someone is crying.

At any moment, someone is laughing.

At any moment, someone is yelling, someone is whispering.

At any moment someone is being lifted up and someone else is being torn down.

At any moment in our world someone is rejoicing and someone is mourning.

At any moment someone is finding and someone is losing.

At any moment someone is being born and someone is dying.

At any moment.<sup>1</sup>

We come today to a specific moment which hangs between life and death. It is a moment that Jesus prolongs deliberately. It is a moment where some cry, some hope, some believe and some criticize. It is a moment of waiting between death and resurrection. It is a moment which tells the story to God's people about what happens with us in the in-

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Joy Yee, day1.net

between times.

Jesus' close friend Lazarus had been very ill. We don't know the illness. It could have been the flu or pneumonia, or whatever it is 90% of Phoenix seems to have. It could have been cancer or heart trouble or kidney failure. We don't have the medical chart on Lazarus and we know that Mary and Martha could not just call Jesus on his cell phone and say, "Hurry up and come to Bethany. Lazarus is sick. Forget that speaking engagement you have in Judea. We need you here, now."

When Jesus heard of Lazarus' illness from his two sisters, Mary and Martha, he did not rush to Lazarus' side. Instead, Jesus waited for two days and then he traveled to Bethany. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days and buried. Martha and then Mary come to Jesus with a greeting and a reproach, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The sisters' request had been apparently ignored. The problem was not a lack of faith. Both women believed in Jesus and in who he was. The disconcerting problem was that Jesus had not shown up in time to save the man's life.

We don't always know why God does things the way God does. Remember, we are not God. Remember however this Book of Signs that John is writing to people who are trying to understand God and life, just as you and I are trying to understand God and life. Maybe the story, this chapter 11, is about recognizing the in-between times and what we do in in-between times.

We know that there are many beautiful and good things about our world. Babies are born. Deserts bloom. People share and help one another. But we also live with the reality that this same world is broken, not quite right, and sometimes even downright evil. Someday, we hope, everything will be put right and we will be whole again. But until that day, we live in in-between times, waiting for our hopes to be fulfilled. We wait to see our loved ones who have passed on through death. We wait for the scars and wounds we carry around inside to be completely healed. Do you ever still feel the pain from some past hurt? I certainly do. We wait for that time when all our thoughts, all our actions are god-like. We wait for a closeness to God that is tangible and visible and right in front of us without all the walls we build in the way to block the view. For these things and other things, we wait. It is an in-between time.

As Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb, we realize that it is an in-between time for him also. Jesus has been showing the world who he is, sent by God, the teacher of a new way, a new law. And as he shows the new way, he confronts the old ways, and he makes enemies. By a cruel irony, Jesus will be put to death because he brought Lazarus back to life. Worried about the Roman occupiers and the attention drawn to Jesus by the people, the powers that be ask, "What are we to do? This man performs many signs. If we let him go on, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation." Jesus had to be stopped. With the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus had moved to an in-between time, a moment between life and the death that awaited him on the cross.

You and I have been in that same in-between moment, the one between life and death. It is the moment you get the news, “there’s nothing more we can do.” It came for me with my father’s kidney cancer and when he said, “I can beat this,” and we all knew the end was near. It is the moment when you hear, “There’s been a terrible accident.” It is the moment when life as you know it suddenly changes, dramatically changes, and you feel like it is all over, death.

And what do you do?

One of the things Jesus does in the in-between time is weep. In the in-between time there are tears. No matter how sure we are of God's promises and how strong our hopes are, God's people will still be moved to tears. When John says that Jesus was deeply moved and troubled, his words literally mean that Jesus groaned violently and was shaken to the very depths of his being. Weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith. Mary and Martha and God-with-us-Immanuel-Jesus wept tears at the pain and struggle and sorrow of the in-between times. It is okay to cry.

And secondly, in the in-between time there is also work. Jesus could have raised Lazarus any way he wanted to. Instead, he chose to ask others to roll the stone away. He chose to resurrect Lazarus with his grave clothes on, and then he asked others to help take off the linen shroud.

God seems to be like that--always seeking human cooperation in accomplishing God’s purposes. Jesus invited his disciples and us to follow him. To love as he loved. To serve as he served. To lay down our lives for others just like he did. It is a serious calling that honors us. We are invited to join God in God’s work of redemption--to be part of Christ’s church and help roll stones away and remove grave clothes from people in this world who are entombed in fear or loneliness or failure or resentment or wounds. We don't raise people to new life in Christ. But God lets us help.

That’s what church is about. Making a decision to join a church and be active--to live your life with a specific group of Christians, to learn about love by loving and being loved, to join gifts and abilities in ministry, to commit to a life of service in all of life, to do together what no one of us could do by ourselves, this is the church at its best. We heard it in Appreciative Inquiry: Church of the Beatitudes at its best...gives outside of itself, learns, sings, preaches, cares, and heals.

On the communion table on the second Sunday of every month, today, sits a small bowl of oil. Every second Sunday at the end of the service of worship someone from the Health cabinet, a ministry of this church, carries that oil out to a healing service. It is an intimate time, a holy time, a time to re-enact an ancient ritual of the church universal, prayer and anointing with oil. People ask for prayer for themselves, for those that they love, for those named in our corporate prayers. I suspect there have been times when there have been tears. Amen. I suspect there have been times when people have said God is calling me to be a healer to others. I have work to do. Thanks be to God. It is an open service; all are welcome. How wonderful it would be that more would take the moments and the opportunity offered.

We live in an in-between time where there are tears, there is work, and there are hopes. And in the in-between time, at any moment, someone is crying and someone is laughing. At any moment someone is yelling and someone is whispering. At any moment someone is being lifted up and someone else is being torn down. At any moment in our world, someone is rejoicing and someone is mourning. At any moment someone is finding and someone is losing. At any moment someone is being born and someone is dying.

Don't give up at any moment. Keep going at any moment. Hang on at any moment. Rejoice in any moment. The good news of the Lazarus story is that it is God's story of how God is redeeming the universe God made and loves. When we cry out from the depths, God hears. When Jesus seems slow in coming, he is coming nevertheless. And if we worry that it is too late, Jesus shows us that it is never too late. After we have become convinced that all is lost, when we are ready to concede to death and are only seeking to contain the damage or bury it, Jesus demonstrates that there is no loss, no death, no tragedy, no depth, no power in heaven or earth or under the earth beyond the reach of infinite love and abundant love. Amen.