

On Loss & Grief: Waiting for God's Glory
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on John 11:1-45 (3/21 & 3/22/15)
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The summer of 1993, before my sophomore year of high school, my family was preparing to move from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to East Lansing, Michigan. We were moving for a year only so my dad could do concentrated work on his Ph.D. at Michigan State University. (Go Michigan State Spartans: beat those Virginia Cavaliers!!!)

We didn't move until August, and, early in the summer, my mom, dad, sister, my maternal grandparents, and I went on a wonderful driving trip to Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks.

At the end of the vacation, we were on our way back to Sioux Falls and we made our final overnight stop in Sturgis, South Dakota, where we planned to stay with some family on my mom's side.

We were tired from days and days of driving and sight-seeing. It felt good to know we were almost home. But, when we arrived in Sturgis, we were met with bad news: my Grandma Rosemarie – my dad's mother – had had a sudden heart attack.

Grandma and Grandpa had been out for dinner at their favorite restaurant in Trenton, Michigan – the Detroit suburb where my dad grew-up. They had come home and had gone about their usual evening activities in the house – Grandma retiring to the living room couch, Grandpa putzing around upstairs.

When Grandpa returned to the living room, he found my grandmother unconscious. He called 911 and, when the paramedics got there, they were able to get her heart going again, but she was nearly brain dead. And so there we were in Western South Dakota while my beloved grandmother was on life-support at a hospital in Michigan.

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I was 14 and this was the first real life-and-death situation I'd encountered with my family. We all held each other, we cried...and then we got right back into the van and headed to Sioux Falls.

After a long night in the car – again, after a long *day* in the car – we dropped my mom's parents off at their house in Sioux Falls, we stopped at *our* house to add funeral clothes to our vacation wardrobes, and we continued driving east to suburban Detroit.

My dad, his brothers, and my grandfather made the decision to remove my grandmother's life-support...and then we waited for the inevitable.

After my grandmother's funeral, my weary family drove back to Sioux Falls and we immediately prepared ourselves for the move to Michigan.

A month later, we'd packed up much of our house in Sioux Falls and had moved into our small campus apartment in East Lansing. We had begun to settle into life in a new place. Then, one day in August, I arrived back to the apartment after shooting baskets at the nearby school to find my mom sobbing on the phone.

"Grandpa Loren died," she said through chokes and tears. Like my dad's mother had just a month-and-a-half earlier, my mom's father had had a sudden heart attack. He was already gone.

And I knew what that meant. So I went into the bedroom my sister and I shared and immediately began packing funeral clothes into a suitcase, preparing for the long drive to Sioux Falls..

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Both of my other two grandparents have since died...but the situations surrounding my grandmother's and my grandfather's deaths back in 1993 are what I think about when I read today's story from John chapter 11 about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

As far as my family goes, those are our stories of death and grief – they were not tragic deaths, but they were sudden. In the story from John 11, however, you get the sense that, not only was Lazarus' illness and death sudden, but it was also tragic.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus'. They were like family, really...probably all three of them around Jesus' age or perhaps even quite a bit younger. Lazarus was too young to have gotten so sick. He was too young to die. And in today's story, the grief of the people in it is *palpable*.

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Today is the 5th Sunday in the season of Lent – the 40-day journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

Here at McCabe, our Lenten journey has been framed by our "I'm Not Okay" series. In this series, we've explored many of the ways in which we humans are fragile...the ways in which we are not "okay." So far, we've considered the realities of temptation...doubts and questions of faith...physical illness...worry and fear over the future.

Last week we thought about how judgmental we can be – how God calls us to be merciful in our attitudes toward others, because we receive that same mercy from God...whether or not we deserve it.

Today we've landed on loss and grief – and we're using the lens of John chapter 11 to look at these universal human experiences.

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Today's story with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is a story of loss and grief within a family. It's a story of illness, death, disappointment, grief, and, of course, it's also a story about resurrection...it's a story about the new life God offers us through Jesus Christ.

When it was read, you were asked to listen very carefully – to pay attention to the characters...to think about their thoughts and feelings...to place yourself within the life of the story. If you've had a dear one die – as most of us have – there is *something* in this story with which you are familiar.

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Mary and Martha were beside themselves with worry and grief over their brother Lazarus' grave illness...so they called for their beloved Jesus, hoping he would come fix it, that he might work some sort of healing miracle...after all, he'd done that for others before.

Or perhaps they were hoping he would at least be there *with* them, that they might support and care for each other as Lazarus died. This is a family story...and Jesus was like family to these siblings.

The sisters wanted their dear friend to be with them: *now*. But that's not what happened...Jesus didn't go to them right away.

By the time he *did* get there, Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Martha cried when Jesus finally got near to their home. She was beside herself with disappointment and anger. You can almost hear her say, "What took you so long?" And all Jesus said in response was, "Your brother will live again!"

"I *know*," Martha responded. "I *know*...I *know* he will be raised to life on the last day. I *know* that." It's as if she said, "But that doesn't matter right now. Right now we want him *here*. Alive. *With* us." //

When Mary encountered Jesus, she, too, said, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." *She* cried. Those *around* her cried. And, in that moment it's as if Jesus *finally* got it...as if he finally realized how desperate and grief-stricken they really were. So *he* cried. They then approached the tomb...rolled the stone away...and Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

Just as Jesus had told his disciples it would, Lazarus' sickness ultimately brought glory to God. Because he raised Lazarus from the dead, people saw and believed Jesus was God's Messiah, the holy Savior come to redeem them.

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The end of this story is wonderful...but the rest of it is not. Despite the glorious end result, it's disappointing that Jesus didn't immediately head toward Bethany to be with Mary and Martha as Lazarus died.

Despite the glorious end result, it's upsetting that he lollygagged around, waited for Lazarus to die, and *then* decided it was time to go be with his dear friends. Despite the glorious end result...there is so much in this story that is so very, very disappointing.

Isn't this just how we feel sometimes? That, in our darkest hours, Jesus isn't there *when* – or in the *way* – we need him to be?

Jesus said he waited – that he chose not to immediately tend to Lazarus – in order to bring glory to God.

And glory *was* brought to God, when, days later, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But where is the instant comfort and healing in that?

I'm not sure promises of future glory sounded like good news to Mary and Martha. They wanted the pain taken away. They wanted their brother back. *Immediately*...not sometime down the road.

Mary and Martha are so very, very *real* in this story – and I love them for that. They are grasping for good news in the midst of their grief. And Jesus *does* offer that good news...eventually. But “eventually” just doesn't feel soon enough sometimes, does it?

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In 2011, dear friends of mine lost their 18-month-old daughter, Samantha, to a rare, genetic disease called Severe Combined Immunodeficiency, or “SCID.” As I was preparing this message, I thought of their story and I am so grateful to them for giving me permission to tell you a piece of it.¹

Unless there is a successful bone marrow transplant within a few months of birth, an infant with SCID never develops of fully functioning immune system...and they typically die before they turn one due to complications from viral or bacterial infections most babies can easily fight off on their own.

My friends didn't realize Samantha had SCID until she was about 18-months-old and got an infection that just wouldn't go away. This discovery came tragically late and Samantha did not survive.

¹ Samantha's mom, Sara, blogs about her ongoing grief and healing at <https://burstingthebubble8.wordpress.com/>

Now, there are tests that can be done to check for SCID as part of newborn screenings...but very few states include the SCID test in their standard, mandated screening. Since Samantha's death, my friends have hosted fundraising events and they have joined with SCID support groups nationwide to encourage state legislatures to add SCID testing to their standard newborn screenings.

As a result of their combined efforts, some of the states they've lobbied have added the test...and they're working on it for North Dakota. (They moved here from Oklahoma a couple of years ago.)

My friends even learned that a child's life was saved back in Oklahoma not long after Samantha died. That baby girl happened to have the same pediatrician Samantha had had. When similar symptoms emerged, the doctor knew what she was seeing and they were able to quickly move forward on a course of treatment.

That baby is now a healthy, thriving little girl after having received a successful bone marrow transplant years ago...all thanks to Samantha and a capable, attentive pediatrician.

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My friends' story is absolutely beautiful...but its beauty does *not* diminish its tragedy. Two wonderful parents lost their sweet, 18-month-old girl and no parent anywhere should have to experience that kind of loss.

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Now, I am *not* someone who believes God plans for this kind of tragedy. I do, however, believe with all my heart and soul that, from the moment Samantha died – and even before she died – God was working to shine glorious light into that tragic darkness.

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God's glory was eventually revealed in today's story when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. God's glory was eventually revealed – and continues to be revealed – in my friends' story about their daughter's death.

God's glory is also being revealed to each and every one of *us*. But sometimes we have to wait to see that glory...and, the waiting can be especially difficult during seasons of loss and grief.

The good news is that God *does* work to bring glory in the midst of our grief. That glory will come in big and small ways, and we may have to wait for it – but it *will* come. When we grieve, God *will* make everything okay...eventually.

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When we are not “okay,” it can be difficult to see how God is working to bring help and glory into our lives.

So, today, we have the opportunity to release to Jesus some of the ways in which we are not okay.

I invite you now to find a writing utensil *and* one of those pieces of dissolving paper. If you don't have a piece of this paper, our ushers will be making a pass through the room with extras, so let them know if you need one.

Once you have a piece of the paper, write on it a word or phrase representing your own brokenness. It could be one of the themes from this series – temptation, doubt, illness, worry, judgmentalism, grief. It could also be the name of someone you're struggling with.

Take a few moments to think and to write. Then, when you're ready, you are invited to come to the front and place your piece of paper into the bowl of water. After placing your paper into the bowl of water, please return to your seat by the sides of the room.

As your paper dissolves in the water, may you be assured that God is working to bring healing and transformation to your brokenness.