

When Life Is Uncertain

John 11:38-44

This last Friday I headed out to run a four mile loop around our neighborhood. I turned right off of Ustick on to Dorman and headed north to Linden. As I came down the slight incline and reached the level ground approaching Linden, the Caldwell Police Department had a “radar trailer” parked there to flash the speed of passing cars. As I approached there were no cars around me – it was just me. The radar flashed that I was running at 82 miles per hour. I looked twice – was it 02 mph? No, it really was flashing 82 mph! Wow – some days and weeks do tend to come at us fast but that was hilarious. It almost made me feel like I needed to slow down and rest for a while.

This last week is one that I will remember. On Thursday afternoon we estimate that over 700 people were here as we celebrated the life of Tina Stattner. Hers was a beautiful memorial service. Pastor Kay Cole and Pastors Doug and Steve blessed us as we remembered a life lived so well. And then we had a small army of volunteers who were working behind the scenes to make sure that the building was ready and that we could host Dave and Garron and Justin and their family and friends afterwards for a meal. It was a day of sorrow and grief as we said good-bye to Tina. It was a day to celebrate a life lived well. But it was also a day when I was proud of our Deer Flat family for the way we came together to serve the Stattner family and friends.

And later that day many of you opened your mail and found a letter from me with the announcement of Pastor Randy’s desire to resign as our Worship Pastor. This is a decision that Randy and Bev have prayerfully and carefully considered for some time. I listened to Pastor Randy in multiple conversations in recent days and he has convinced me that after much prayer and consideration he believes that this is God’s will for him. At present Randy does not have a ministry role or secular job awaiting him. He is stepping out on faith believing this is the Lord’s leading for him. Randy may choose not to pursue another ministry appointment right away. I have told Randy that if he chooses

to stay in the community that he and Bev are welcome to continue as a part of our Deer Flat family.

There are two reasonable questions that quickly come to mind – timing and process. Randy and I are still prayerfully considering the timing of when his resignation will take effect, in consultation with our Board of Directors. And in terms of process– the heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus. Randy and I, along with our Board of Directors, want to facilitate this unexpected transition in a way that gives honor to Jesus. I have asked our Board to pray with me that we would facilitate this transition in a way that gives dignity to Randy and Bev as they come to the conclusion of their ministry role with us.

This is an opportunity for us to live out our identity as a church family. Transitions are not easy, are sometimes unexpected, and always bring a unique set of challenges. Yet in all of this we can continue to become more like Jesus by the way we process change and express our love and care for one another.

As the Deer Flat family we need to continue in prayer for Randy and Bev as they seek the Lord’s leading for the future. They are stepping out on faith in obedience to the leading of the Lord in their lives. I do understand that our Deer Flat family is weary of transition. Jesus is Lord of the Church. Let’s keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. I thank you for being such a loving and encouraging church family.

This morning I was scheduled to preach on “inspiring worship”. Inspiring worship is a very important part of our identity – of our past, present and future. But as I prayed and thought through our service this morning, it seemed to be inappropriate and even insensitive to publicly acknowledge that we are about to face yet another transition and then quickly move into a message on “inspiring worship”. The more I thought and prayed about this the more I began to sense that the Lord wanted me to find a message that was more real to the moment we are facing as a family. And so as you have noticed, there are no sermon notes or outlines for this morning. You can take notes and journal if

you desire or you are free to put your pen down and just ... listen. By the way, Rick Day places an audio tape of each week's sermon on our website every Monday. He also includes the manuscript of each message. Each Monday you can go to our website and either listen to the message or get my notes and read through them.

So I set aside my message on inspiring worship. I waited before the Lord and thought I had a message that would be more real to our morning and to what we are facing as a family. I prayed and studied the scripture I had in mind and wrote out a sermon that I thought the Lord wanted for this morning. As I finished I pushed back from the computer as if to say to the Lord "Great, now I am ready". But instead of any affirmation I felt a silence from the Lord. And so I started to listen to the Spirit of God. It seemed that the second sermon that I prepared was okay but not at all what the Lord wanted for this morning. And so I set that sermon aside as well, and spent a couple more days waiting before the Lord in prayer once again. It actually took about forty-eight hours but I began to clearly sense the message that God wanted me to bring to you this morning.

I believe the Word of the Lord for us this morning is found in John 11 and the story of Lazarus. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? What do we do with our emotions? Can we be honest with God? Does God always hear us when we pray? What should I think or feel if His answer or response seems to be delayed? Can God be glorified when we are surprised and even fearful? Before we unpack this story I think it is good for us to begin with God's conclusion – let's sample the dessert first. This is a story of unexpected and painful transition. Yet in The Message (John 11:45) it says "That was a turnaround for many of the Jews who were with Jesus. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in Him." Transitions can serve to help us and our neighbors to become more like Jesus. They can also be a turn around time when God is unusually glorified. Let's go into the Word of God and see how this is possible.

I invite you to open your Bibles to John 11. Keep your eyes on this chapter as I work my way through the story. Lazarus was the brother of sisters – Mary and Martha. Jesus had a personal friendship with these three siblings. Lazarus becomes sick. The sisters send

for Jesus. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, but He chose not to come. Verse 18 tells us that Jesus was only two miles away from them. Just minutes away from being able to heal Lazarus from his seemingly grave sickness. Jesus said something about Lazarus' sickness not ending in death and that this was for God's glory. I think the disciples clearly remembered what Jesus said but really didn't at all understand what it was He was saying – at least not yet. Jesus stayed where He was and continued with what He was doing for two more days. And while Jesus was carrying on with what He was doing where He was, Lazarus died.

In verse 7 we read that Jesus was finally ready to travel. He invited His disciples to join Him for a trip back to Judea. They were not sure that this was such a good idea. They reminded Jesus that the last time He was in Judea that some people had tried to kill Him. And then Jesus responded with yet another confusing word – something about the hours of daylight and if we walk in the light we will not stumble but if we walk in the night we stumble without the light. Again, I think the disciples clearly remembered what Jesus said but had no idea at all what it was He was trying to say to Him. I wouldn't at all be surprised if they offered a collective "Huh?!".

In verse 11 their conversation took a turn back to Lazarus. Jesus acknowledged that Lazarus was dead and that He wanted to go to Lazarus to "wake him up". The disciples were only more confused. "Jesus – which is it? Is Lazarus asleep or is he really dead?" But by then Jesus was walking down the road, headed back to Judea and the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Then one of them called Thomas said "we might as well go with him and die together". Not a very cheery bunch as they began to walk the two miles from Jerusalem to Bethany.

Verse 17 shows the arrival of Jesus. Lazarus had now been dead and in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha had a house full of friends and family who were mourning with them while they also tried to comfort the sisters. They heard that Jesus was coming. Mary stayed while Martha went out to meet Jesus.

The first words out of Martha's mouth were "Jesus, where have you been? If you had come when we asked for you to come, my brother Lazarus would still be alive!" And then perhaps as if she is wondering if she might be speaking too strongly she says (in verse 22) "But I know that even now God will give You whatever You ask".

And then Jesus and Martha have this conversation about the resurrection as Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again. Martha says "That's great. I know that he will rise again at the resurrection of the last day". And Jesus saw a teaching moment and began to respond (in verses 25-26) "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha's response is remarkable in demonstrating her faith. She said "Yes Lord. I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God ...".

Then we see Martha leaving Jesus to go back to her house to talk with her sister Mary. She called Mary to the side and told her that Jesus wanted to talk with her. Mary left and quickly went to see Jesus. Some of her friends saw Mary leave and they followed her because they thought she was going to Lazarus' tomb. But instead, they followed her to Jesus. Mary's first words to Jesus were the same as her sister Martha's – "Jesus, where have you been? If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died."

Verse 33 tells us that Mary was weeping as she talked to Jesus. Her friends who had followed her were also crying. Jesus was "deeply moved" by their grief. He asked where Lazarus' tomb was. They took him to the tomb. As they arrived it simply says (in verse 35), "Jesus wept". Real Tears. Real sorrow. Jesus wept. Those watching were confused. Some said that Jesus must have really loved his friend Lazarus while others said that if this was true why didn't Jesus come and keep Lazarus from dying?

At this point, I want us to stop and read through these next few verses. I invite you to follow along or to simply listen as I read verses 38-44. (Read)

There are some lessons here that I believe the Lord wants us to take home with us.

1. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? Look for Jesus. The first thing that Mary and Martha did was to look for Jesus. Even when you don't understand exactly what Jesus might be saying to you in the moment, keep listening. Even if you don't understand exactly why Jesus is responding, or perhaps not responding, keep looking to Jesus. We have a great word of encouragement in Hebrews 12:1-3: "... Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (sometimes we don't choose our race – the race we run in life is marked out for us). Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." When we are overwhelmed with transition and change and life itself, how do we keep from becoming discouraged and weary and without hope? We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Look at how Jesus responded. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus and try to be more like Him. Look for Jesus.
2. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? Don't hide your emotions. Mary and Martha cried in the presence of Jesus. And even Jesus Himself wept. We do harm to ourselves when we try to deny or stifle our emotions. God created us with emotions. Our emotions are a part of God's creation. In Genesis 1:31 we read that when God finished creation, He stepped back and looked at Adam and Eve and all that he had created and He said, "It is good". Actually the Word of God says that God said, "It was very good". Notice that God didn't say that "wow – I did a pretty good job in this creation stuff. Look at Adam and Eve. They are beautiful. They are made in My image. They are just what I had in mind – except for their emotions. Something must have gone wrong there. I don't know why they are so emotional. Especially Eve – what's up with that?! I am going to have to figure out a way to fix that." No, God looked at us and said that we were created in His image and that our creation was good – very good. God gave us our emotions. We shouldn't have to deny them or stifle them. We need to learn how to better own our emotions in biblically

- healthy ways. Sure emotions can be abused. If I stood before you and needed to cry every Sunday with every sermon that would be out of balance and would indicate that something within me is emotionally broken. But for me to be real in the moment and to cry with you should not be an embarrassment to me or to you because it certainly is not an embarrassment to God. Jesus wept. We can and should feel free to find the healthy and safe ways and places and friends to express our emotions. We don't need to hide our emotions.
3. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? We need to be honest with God. Mary and Martha were quite honest with Jesus. "Where were you? Why didn't you come? If you had only been here my brother would not have died?" You didn't come and I don't understand and I don't like it that you didn't come!". God is not going to run and hide because we are honest with Him. God is not going to zap us with lightening because we are honest with Him. You see ... God already knows what we are thinking. He simply wants us to be honest with him and before Him. Imagine a conversation that goes something like this: How was your day? Fine! Just fine! What about fine don't you understand? My day was just fine!" It doesn't seem to be an honest response to a sincere question. And it is obvious that this person's day really wasn't fine at all. Be honest with God. But in our honesty, we need to remember that we are speaking to God Himself. Martha was honest but she remembered all along that she was talking to Jesus. We need to learn to be honest with one another and with God without using honesty as a license to be abusive or destructive or disrespectful. We should be honest with God.
 4. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? Mary and Martha were deeply disappointed that Jesus did not come when they called for Him. But Jesus' delay wasn't because He didn't hear them. It is important for us to remember that God always hear us when we pray. Well, I should qualify that. Psalm 66:18 says that if I cherish sin in my life that God will not hear my prayers. God hears the prayers of a sinner but God does not respond to those prayers until we are ready to let go of our sin. But when we are trying to become more like Jesus, God does hear our prayers. In that same Psalm, David goes on to say "But God has surely

listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld His love from me!” One of the sad realities in life is that hurt people will tend to hurt other people. Hurt people ... hurt people. Even parents who have unresolved hurts and broken places in their lives will withhold love from their children when that love is most needed. Even friends who have unresolved hurts and broken places in their lives will withhold love from their friends when they most need it. God does not withhold His love. He hears our prayers.

5. How should we respond when the unexpected happens? If God hears me when I pray, what should I think or feel if His answer or response seems to be delayed? Jesus was two miles from Lazarus. Just two miles. With such urgency he could have easily been there in thirty minutes. But Jesus didn't come. And Lazarus died. What are we suppose to think or feel then? This is one of the most difficult things for me to say, but it is a Word from God for each of us. What should I do when the unexpected happens? What should I do when God doesn't seem to answer when I need Him? What do I do when things seem to only go from bad to worse? We need to remember that God is working even when we can't see Him at work. God is still working even when we think the worst has just happened. God is always at work on our behalf. It is just that we can't always see all that he is doing for us. And where does that leave us? When we don't know what else to do, what can we do? Trust – trust God. David the Psalmist said (56:4) “I will trust in the Lord and not be afraid”. In Proverbs 3:5 it says that we are to trust in the Lord with all of our heart. The prophet Isaiah said (30:15) that in quietness and trust is our strength. And Jesus said (John 14:1) “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me.” Whatever happens – whatever happens – we can trust Jesus. He is always – always – at work on our behalf even when we can not see Him at work; even when we do not understand what it is that He is doing, even when we think the worst possible has just happened – Jesus is still at work on our behalf. And we can put all of our trust in Jesus.

Volunteer to help demonstrate trust.

Hear again the word of God from The Message (John 11:45) where it says “That was a turnaround for many of the Jews who were with Jesus. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in Him.” God can take our unexpected transitions and use them as a turnaround experience in our lives. Dear Flat family, how are you doing this morning? When we don’t know what else to do, we can trust Jesus. Look for Jesus. He will be there when we need Him.