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The National Presbyterian Church

High Anxiety

John 11:1-44

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In our sermons beginning last fall and going all the way through Easter we have been and we still are looking together at the story of our Lord Jesus as we find it recorded for us in the gospel according to John, one of four accounts of Jesus' ministry that we have in the pages of scripture. Each of these accounts is similar but they are also different – like the portrait of the same person painted by different artists: different aspects of Jesus' life and character come before us in the different gospels.

John's gospel in particular, for example, draws our attention to the way that Jesus' life interacts with the lives of others whose lives cross paths with his life – interacts powerfully, permanently, eternally with their lives.

- For most of these people the change is positive. Their sense of purpose, their feelings of shame and embarrassment, their intellectual curiosity, their broken relationships and their broken bodies, their power and their powerlessness, their loss of hope, their sense of self esteem, their spiritual blindness – all of these and many more aspects of their lives are touched by Jesus. For most of these people the change is positive . . .
- But for some, well, this contact with Jesus wasn't so positive.

What we have seen in recent weeks as we've looked at John Chapter 8, 9 and 10 is that Jesus' interaction in particular with the religious people, the religious leaders (and remember in Israel at that time there was no great distinction between church and state. They were both religious and political leaders.) Jesus' interaction with the religious and political leaders was not positive. Or their embrace of him was not positive. Their sense of his coming into their lives was not positive at all. They were troubled and indeed they felt threatened by Jesus' authority, by his power, by his popularity, by the fact that the crowds were listening to him rather than to them. They were the people with 'the name', they should have had the authority but things were slip-sliding away towards Jesus, and they became especially offended (as we saw last week as we looked at John Chapter 10) they became especially offended when Jesus accused them of being

'faithless' shepherds, 'worthless' shepherds, 'useless' shepherds – ineffective leaders of God's people.

And he pressed his message home by quoting from the book of the prophet Ezekiel where Ezekiel blasts the leaders of ancient Israel for their ineffectiveness. And they would have picked up on this. They knew what Jesus was saying. And their hatred for him began to grow.

Indeed by the time we get to the end of John Chapter 10 many of them picked up stones to throw at Jesus, to put Jesus to death. They are so angry that they want to kill him – many, though we know, not all. We know for example, of a man called Nicodemus, one of the leaders who actually wants to listen to what Jesus has to say. So there is a spectrum here. But for all of them, at the very least Jesus' presence and criticism causes them anxiety. Anxiety! He unsettles their stable world. He challenges their status, their self-esteem, their sense of who they are, and what they're supposed to be doing in this world around about them.

And it's this anxiety; this high anxiety that actually unites John Chapter 10 that we looked at last Sunday with John Chapter 11 that we just read and that we're going to be thinking about today.

Chapters that are connected, bound together, by a sense of anxiety that Jesus creates.

Now most people don't tend to think of Jesus as creating anxiety. 'Creating anxiety' is not his purpose for coming to this world. After all what we want from Jesus is peace, isn't it? Instead of anxiety we want peace from Jesus. Indeed, this is his promise – if we skip ahead to John Chapter 14 (v.27) we find Jesus making this very promise: *"Peace I give to you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."* Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and this is what we want from Jesus. And there is no doubt that this is what Jesus wants to give. This is the promise of John Chapter 14. *But you don't get to John Chapter 14, to peace, unless you pass through John Chapter 10 and Chapter 11.*

Indeed, in Chapter 11 Jesus is creating anxiety quite deliberately not just amongst the religious leaders, his opponents, but now, in our reading, he is creating anxiety even amongst his friends – creating anxiety in the hearts of his closest friends, his best friends: Mary and Martha and Lazarus. ***Jesus quite deliberately unsettles them too, not just his enemies, but his friends. Is this the Jesus you know? The one who unsettles, shakes things up? Not just for his enemies but for his friends?***

Think for example of those disciples at the beginning of John 11 in this story that we read earlier, and how they are unsettled by Jesus. Jesus gets this news of Lazarus' illness, perhaps his best friend, and Mary and Martha are his sisters. The news from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is ill. Jesus knows that Lazarus actually has died, but the message is that Lazarus is ill, he's very sick. And Jesus

says “I want to go to Bethany to be with them.” Now Bethany is just a stone’s throw from Jerusalem. It’s like a suburb of Jerusalem. It’s like just crossing the Potomac into Virginia from D.C. It’s that close and you can look across the Kidron Valley and there it is. So when the disciples hear that Jesus wants to go to Bethany to be with Martha and Mary and Lazarus, they’re scared. They’re scared quite literally to death.

They had recently left Jerusalem where Jesus was about to be stoned to death. They’d gone up north in the Jordan valley. They’ve moved out in a place of safety, in the Jordan valley, surrounded by crowds who are supportive, and now Jesus wants to go back down there to Jerusalem, as dangerous then as it is now, where he might be put to death . . . and they’re supposed to be going with him? You have to be kidding! “We’re not going to do that no matter how much we like this guy. This could be death to you Jesus. This could be death to you. And to us too!”

This is not what they signed up for! I mean, when they were home in Galilee, when they first gave their hearts to Jesus, they had thought he’s be the conqueror of all. He was the king. He would lead them inescapably and inevitably to a wonderful future. But what was becoming absolutely apparent was that this ‘wonderful future’ was somewhere off in the future somewhere else in the world, and that the *immediate* future was looking pretty bleak.

People in power were turning against Jesus. They wanted to stone him. Death seemed to be around the corner. Not just Jesus’ death but almost certainly *their* death as well. And if not their death, if it were only Jesus’ death then, still, the whole movement still would fall flat, and they would be left with embarrassment and shame, and they’d head back home and they just would feel that sense of loss and people would make fun of them. They just did not want this. This was not what they signed up for.

And so with this news of Lazarus being ill they were very anxious. There was high anxiety amongst Jesus’ friends and Jesus helped sustain it, beyond creating it, by saying this is what we are going to do! We’re going to Jerusalem! “Oh we’ll go with you, Jesus,” says Thomas, “and we will die with you!” Jesus ignores him and they head on their way.

Sometimes we may feel like this too. We sign up for Jesus, we’re on his side, but things don’t work out exactly as we want them to work out.

- Maybe we quit our job in order to do something meaningful and spiritual for God, and then we lose our job or the money runs out or we begin to tithe and the budget is so tight that we cannot do it.
- Or we make a real attempt at reconciliation. I’m going to be Jesus’ person, I’m going to love my enemy and we go to somebody to make up and all that happens is that we’re chewed out. So we cry no. Jesus no. This is not the way I thought it was going to be.

Well that was the cry of the disciples. And Jesus doesn't listen. They head on their way down to Bethany and to Jerusalem.

There's anxiety amongst the disciples *and there's anxiety too amongst Mary and Martha*. And once again it's Jesus' fault that they are so anxious! His fault, not for all their anxiety but, well, for not dealing with the situation in a way that would have at least made them less uncomfortable! Listen to the opening verses of our chapter again. The setting of the scene of the story. And then in particular listen to Verse 5, which is one of the strangest verses in all of scripture. So, John Chapter 11 at Verse 1 . . . a certain man, Lazarus of Bethany, was ill; Lazarus, the brother of Mary and her sister Martha.

Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said this illness does not lead (or 'end up in') to death. [DR: That's what the Greek means: this death is not going to be the end of the story.] Rather it is for God's glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. [DR: And then Verse 5, the strange verse.] Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Now that's not exactly what you would expect is it, from somebody who is a really good friend? So he hears about it, and what would you expect? Immediately he sends off a text. Makes a phone call. Gets on Facebook, finds out exactly what's going on there. Or he rushes straight down to Jerusalem to help out. Because he loves them he's going to do something very quickly. But not that's not what we read. We read that although he loved them he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. There is no rushing. *He just leaves Mary and Martha in their anxiety*. He knows Lazarus is not ill, he has died – which in some ways makes it even worse!! He leaves his friends in their grief and in their pain and their sorrow with their anger mounting up against Jesus.

So that when he finally comes there is no thanksgiving. There is no thanks in their hearts. Instead there's blame rising up within them and they cannot keep their mouths shut. Both of them blame Jesus: "Jesus!! if you'd been here . . ." and maybe they wag their finger: "If you'd been here this wouldn't have happened" – telling him off.

Now on the one hand, this is a statement of belief: "If you had been here *we know you could have done something*." But on the other hand it's also clearly an attack.

They don't do their math by the way. Lazarus has been dead four days and Jesus waited two days to start his journey . . . Jesus wouldn't have been there in time anyway.

But when you're emotionally distraught you don't do your math! In their pain they only felt like skewering him:

"You could have done better Jesus. You really could. *If you are the Son of God*, we know who you are – and they give all the right

titles – you could have done better if you had been here. We’ve lost our brother. Your best friend. You could have been here. Our source of income, our social security. You’ve let us down!”

So *the sisters* were anxious! And *the disciples* were anxious! And the *religious leaders* are anxious! *Everybody* is anxious . . . *and probably you and I* are anxious, as well, about something or another. There’s enough stuff in this world that is beyond our control to make all of us anxious about something. And all it takes is just one little thing that we can’t quite put in the box in the way that we want it, to make us anxious. So we’re worried, we’re anxious . . .

- what’s going to happen to the economy
- what’s going to happen to China
- what’s going to happen with climate change
- what’s going to happen in the Presidential election
- what’s going to happen in Congress
- what’s going to happen in our own family for goodness sake
- our marriage or our singleness
- or the cost of college for the kids
- or our health or our job or our income
- or our church or our denomination
- or the values of our nation . . . and, perhaps more important than that to all of us today . . .
- What’s going to happen in the Super Bowl?

We just can’t control it all. It’s out of our control. We’re not too sure what’s going to happen and some of this really niggles its way into us and makes us anxious. We’re surrounded by millions of things (if we want to be anxious), surrounded by millions of things that we can do nothing about and that have the power to make us anxious just as Mary and Martha were anxious, just as Jesus’ disciples were anxious, just as the religious leaders were anxious.

And this anxiety fills John Chapter 10 and John Chapter 11. ***But what is just as clear in reading those chapters is this: that there is one person who is clearly not anxious. Throughout the whole thing, in the midst of all this anxiety there is one person, Jesus, who is not anxious at all.*** He’s not cold, he’s not detached, he’s not so stoic (‘stiff upper lip’) that he has no emotion.

- Jesus weeps. This is where you find that famous verse – Jesus wept (11:35). He wept: “See how he loved him,” the people said.
- But at the same time he does not allow himself to be controlled and dragged down and manipulated by the anxieties of others, by the expectations of others, by the emotional distress of others. He does not sink down to their level but seeks to raise them up to his level.

And you see it in the way that he handles all of the anxiety around him.

(1). Part of his response is very similar to his method of handling a tough situation that we looked at a few weeks ago in John Chapter 8: *Jesus doesn’t*

rush. This is the message of that strange verse, Verse 5. First of all Jesus doesn't rush. He doesn't go into panic. He deliberately slows thing down: he hears the news of Lazarus' illness and he waits two days. He is not going to be manipulated by this situation. He waits. He just calms the whole system down.

(2). And then he reminds his disciples that *time belongs to God*: "Aren't there twelve hours in the day," he says? (John 11:29). This is a reference to God's role in creation, as the one in charge of time – and not just in charge, but the creator of time!

Sometimes we don't think of it this way but just as God created material matter he created time. Time doesn't exist apart from matter or energy. "My times," says the Psalmist (31:15), "are in your hands." Our times are in his hands.

Jesus slows things down. He reminds the disciples that our times are in God's hands.

(3). And then in the third place this non-anxious Jesus tells Martha that *even when the worst happens he's still in charge*. Even if *death* happens it doesn't hinder God's purpose. Even when our plans go astray and collapse. Life as we have planned it: and this for us sometimes is worse than death, even when life as we have planned it collapses God is still in charge. Martha says to Jesus in Verse 21, "Lord, if you'd been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to him, "I know that he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

And then he drives it home. "Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Base your life on it, not just with your head but with your heart? Do you base your life on this word? Do you believe this?

Martha says, "Yes."

But the truth is she doesn't quite. Not yet, not quite. Still she's not too sure that her life is safe with Jesus, or that Lazarus' death is safe with Jesus. And we know this, we know of her doubt because there's a hesitation in her, which appears in Verse 39: Jesus is going to the tomb to raise Lazarus up after this discussion. He is going to the tomb, and as he arrives there and wants to move the stone away, Martha holds him back. "No, don't do this!" Do you remember that verse? It's a memorable verse. Why should he not do it? Because, as Martha knows, Lazarus has been dead four days . . . and it . . . stinks.

This actually, by the way, is one of the reasons why I believe the gospel account is true to the historical Jesus. Phrases such as this: it stinks! There's a stench. It's the kind of thing, which an editor would have taken out. But as the years go by I think it's one of those stories that the disciples actually

would have remembered. "Martha, you remember what you said when Lazarus was raised? Goodness, it is so embarrassing! What is it you said? I said "it stinks!"

It's just like Peter's foibles. Jesus' lead disciple messing up, denying Jesus. They could have removed these incidents, cleaned things up to tell a better, holier, story about how great the disciples were. But it's there. It's still in there. John keeps it in, because this is what happened at the tomb. And it doesn't stop Jesus.

So Martha wants to stop Jesus from opening the tomb, and in so doing reflects her doubt in Jesus' ability to redeem the situation, but Jesus does it anyway! He adds even more anxiety to her existing anxiety as the stone is rolled away. And Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" And he comes.

Lazarus' life and Lazarus' death are safe with Jesus. Their lives, their deaths are safe with Jesus. And ultimately, and critical for the story as a whole: *Jesus'* life, *Jesus'* death safe in the hands of God. This is critical for us to know as Jesus marches towards his death. And so, too, your life and mine safe with him as well. Lazarus, come out. And as he comes out, he's still bound in funeral cloths. So Jesus says to the crowd: "Unbind him and set him free!"

Which is what God wants to do, is it not, for you and me?

Whatever the bonds of death are, whatever bondage we are in, whatever anxieties we feel, he says to us, "come out! Don't let it grab you and pull you down, but let me unbind you and set you free." Our lives, our death and everything else in between are safe with him.

This is a wonderful message from our story.

But there's one other aspect of the story which needs to be driven home and that is this: *that we probably will never really know, not just in our heads but in our hearts, that our life and our death and everything else in between are safe with him until we have found ourselves in a similar place of high anxiety*, until we, like Mary and Martha, the disciples, as well as the religious leaders, find ourselves screaming at Jesus and saying, "No, Jesus! This is not the way that I planned it. This is not what I signed up for when I asked you into my life."

It is only when we have passed through that place and screamed that scream and said "Lord Jesus, why were you not here?" . . . that we can probably only ever hear him say "Oh but I was, all along. And I've incorporated all of this into my plan and purpose and my timing so that you will be the person I want you to be: effective in my service. Not a faithless shepherd but a faithful shepherd in my service and for my purposes."

Let me close by reading a short piece, which many of you have seen before. It circles the internet from time to time, and was written by Mary Stevenson. Some people think this is rather corny, other people say this sums up everything they

believe. I think it's a summary of our chapter, though with one little addition at the end. It's called "Footprints".

One night I dreamed I was walking along with beach with the Lord.

Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand.

Sometimes there were two sets of footprints.

Other times there was one set of footprints. This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat I could see only one set of footprints.

So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand.

Why when I needed you most have you not been there for me?" (just like, "Lorrrrd! If you had been here my brother would not have died). Why when I needed you most have you not been there for me?

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, is when I carried you."

And I would add these words from the Lord: "not only carried, not just comforted, but molded you, shaped you, cajoled you; did whatever I needed to do painful as it might be to shape you into the person I want you to be. Bearing my glory and being a valuable servant of mine in my kingdom. This is what I want for you. And I will use, yes I will use, even those times of high anxiety to fulfill my will for you."

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