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Sermon: Jarring and Beyond Our Control
Scripture: John 11:17-44
March 26, 2023

Introduction: The last of these passages from John during Lent is Jesus' visit to Bethany, the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. We pick up after an important thing has already occurred, and that is the death of Lazarus. Jesus arrives too late. Hear the word of the Lord as it comes to us from John's gospel. Listen:

John 11:17-44

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus^[§] had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.^[§] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,^[§] the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Several weeks ago I had the opportunity to hear author Malcom Gladwell speak down the street at the New Orleans Book festival held at Tulane. As his midlife crisis, Gladwell has moved away from bookwriting at the moment and poured all his energy into his series of Podcasts called revisionist history. He was there to highlight this relatively new genre, but also used the time to talk about one of his podcasts and how it came together. The podcast he unpacked was called 'King of Tears.' In a coincidental yet unrelated event, I wasted some time this fall watching the mini-series on Showtime 'George and Tammy,' about the life and times of George

Jones and Tammy Wynette. Needless to say each episode is like going from one car wreck to the next one thinking surely it cannot get any worse for these two tumultuous personalities but the lifestyle and the fame and the complicated personalities of two larger than life people just kind of implode and explode from one self-inflicted crisis on the next one. With that as the backdrop and timeline, they record some really amazing songs during those same years, some about breaking up and others about getting back together and all the mess in between. It was toward the end of this period, after George and Tammy were done for good and after George had been yesterday's news and yesterday's country, that George Jones made one more comeback with what is argued to be the greatest country music song ever written. That is, at least what Malcolm Gladwell argues for in his podcast 'King of Tears,' claiming that 'He Stopped Loving Her Today,' by recorded by George Jones and written by Bobby Braddock has made the most people cry and is therefore the greatest country music song ever written. One more point Gladwell makes that is important and that is he thinks country music is a deeper and more authentic genre of music that perhaps the higher acclaimed and celebrated pop music or Rock N' Roll. He even punctuates what he views to be the universality but shallowness of rock music by quoting this line directly from none other than the Beatles: 'she loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.' Not much there, really. In contrast Gladwell celebrates country for the specificity that it talks about heartbreak and crisis and life going wrong, as well as hard living, hardship, divorce, and death. This fascination with country music leads Gladwell to Nashville to interview the author of this song Bobby Braddock; Gladwell comes away with the observation that country music can talk about specific cultural and regional places and emotional places we all know and have been in and the more specific heartache and heartbreak of life packed into complicated ballads and stories.

In 1982, now near-90 year old Willie Nelson, Wilson recorded a song written by Gary P. Nunn entitled 'Last Thing I Needed First Thing This Morning,' which in my view gives Malcolm Gladwell and George Jones a run for the money. The song begins: 'postman delivered a past due bill notice, the alarm clock rang two hours late the garbage man left all the trash on the sidewalk and the hinges fell off of the gate. This morning at breakfast I spilled all the coffee and opened the door on my knee, but the last thing I needed, the first thing this morning, was to have you walk out on me.' Gut punch, context, and we have all had those days, and then he gives us the even more poignant punchline of lives and turmoil and being at the breaking point and a relationship breaking apart. Now as far as I know, Nazareth or Jerusalem for that matter, was not known for its neon lights and smoky

honky tonks or melancholy country performances, but Jesus seems very familiar with and almost expectant to encounter such lives in crisis, and he also seems right at home among people whose lives sound an awful lot like the content of a sad country song. In other words, the music of Nashville or Luckenbach or Ferriday or the Mississippi Delta may not have been there in the first century, but all the people and the struggles and the heartache and brokenness that created such songs were surely there. In this passage alone, it is almost as if Jesus experiences the whole range of human emotions and expresses the whole anatomy of the human soul. He experiences anger and frustration from Mary. He is disturbed in spirit and deeply moved by those who mourn, as well as expressing his own sense of loss. As we know from this passage, 'Jesus wept.' We get sarcasm from some who wonder why Jesus spent so much time with a worthless blind man when he could have been saving his so-called friend's life. We don't just get emotions here either. We also get smells, as Martha herself reminds us, before the tomb is opened, 'already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' There is certainly plenty of good material here for a powerful country song. Heartbreak. Loss. Anger. Disappointment. Lives in crisis.

I think if our religious default is to think that the whole reason to have God around, to bother with God, to have a need for God is mainly to make our lives more comfortable or secure or crisis-free, then who Jesus is what Jesus does is always going to feel jarring, beyond our control, and crisis welcoming rather than crisis avoiding. Jesus would not be good at the job of risk management. We have made our way through these encounters Jesus had with Nicodemus, with the woman at the well, with the man born blind, and now with death and the dead Lazarus, and in every encounter Jesus reveals a faith that is deeper, more challenging, more enriching, more frightening, more joyful, more transforming than any of the participants really wanted, bargained for, or could see. And it is this final encounter with death, that Jesus tells Mary and Lazarus and all the mourners gathered at the tomb, that even death cannot prevent the kingdom of God from breaking into this world and transforming a human life. Jesus is not so much showing off his miraculous powers, but giving us a glimpse of God's future breaking into our present, taking what we thought was worthless and used up, dead and gone, and raising life from the dead and breathing the fullness of life into a human being who was only left for dead. The power that Jesus proclaims and enacts, this power beyond the grave and this fullness of life that comes breaking back in even overtaking what is dead, this is not some easily explained religious advancement or personal growth

or spiritual success, this is not spiritual improvement or religious risk management, but resurrection of the dead, a grace that jars and shocks us to the core even as it also gives new life.

It is no surprise that immediately after this encounter, the powers that be have seen enough and prefer the old incremental measured progress that we can control and steer clear of major crises and messes; they prefer a religion that is there when we need it and helps us deal with some of life's anxieties but not much more; certainly not a faith that asks much of us and certainly not a faith that dabbles in anything as radical as raising the dead, or for that matter, revealing that a blind person can see better than we can or a woman who thinks she has lost her humanity can receive it back more fully than ever. We want a religion of crisis avoidance and Jesus not only loves a crisis as much as any country song does, but he does his best work with them, taking what we thought was dead, worthless, and no longer human, and resurrecting life.

Lives in crisis. Human beings who thought their humanity was lost forever. People at the end of their rope. Lives on the verge of embracing the cynicism of a world whispering in our ears to settle for less. Jesus seems to want to do more in this world than help us navigate late modern upper middle class anxieties, pushing us to live as a Christian community that is at our best not when everything is secure and calm and we are operating smoothly, but when we are on our way into a crisis or experiencing a crisis ourselves or helping each other through a crisis or to see a human life we never saw or noticed before or putting something of ourselves at risk to cross a boundary, walk into a mess, touch a life that the world thought was left for dead. This resurrection of Lazarus points us to the irony of the church, the Christian community. We think we are at our best when we are spit and polished and safe in the port, tethered securely to the dock, and at no risk from wind, waves, and the storms of our world. But we are at our best and fulfill our purpose when the crisis is upon us, when we are wondering why Jesus left us for dead, when we think there cannot possibly be a future ahead without a divine intervention. Over and over again, over all the anger, mourning, fear, and uncertainty, Jesus has a way of walking in at just the right time, resurrecting us yet again, transforming our lives yet again, giving us hope yet again, unbinding us and setting us free, yet again, making us fully alive, so that we can walk, yet again, not into serenity, safety, and unmessiness, but into the next crisis, into the next storm, into the next unredeemable situation, into the next life left for dead. That is where Jesus does his best work. So may we.