Consensus

Volume 29
Issue 1 *Hospitality - The Healing of the World*

Article 12

5-25-2003

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Recommended Citation
Poetzsch, Markus J. (2003) "The Miracle of Waiting," *Consensus*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol29/iss1/12

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The Miracle of Waiting

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Text: John 11:1-44

When we consider the miracles performed by Christ in his earthly ministry – the laying on of hands, the healings with mud and spittle or with words merely, the walking on stormy seas, the feeding of thousands with an impossibly inadequate supply of bread and fish – there is perhaps no act more truly beyond the scope of human comprehension than the raising of a dead man with three simple words: "Lazarus, come out!" Perhaps more so than even Christ's own conquest of death, the exact moment of which is not recorded in the Scriptures and not witnessed, the raising of Lazarus in broad daylight before a crowd of onlookers is an unparalleled spectacle of divine power and love. It is nothing less than God calling a lapsed soul back to itself. "Lazarus, come out!"

Those three words and their consequences are indeed so vivid and memorable, like a sunburst on our mind's eye, that the circumstances surrounding them form but a dark, indistinct backdrop or are forgotten altogether. And this forgetting is pardonable because the miracle is everything, isn't it? To know what Christ can do is surely enough. He raises the dead. That's what we want from him: to enter our lives, our problems, with swift healing, with trumpet sound and thunder clap, with dazzling light, so that we'll know for certain that he exists, that he loves us, that our problems truly matter to him.

The following rationalization is not, I suspect, entirely unfamiliar to us: "I would believe in God if only he would show himself, I mean really reveal himself when I needed him most, do the unexpected, the impossible! God is smart, and surely knows it; then why doesn't God do it? Why doesn't God reveal himself to me in a dream or a vision? Why doesn't God say, 'I love you. Come to me,' in a voice I will understand? Why doesn't God heal when I ask, when I plead? Why doesn't God touch my broken body or the bodies of those I love with healing hands? Then I could believe!"

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After all, if God wants people to believe in him, why doesn't he make himself more believable? Indisputably believable? If God loves us and wants to save us, why doesn't he plunge directly into the water after us and lift us out on mighty arms? Why doesn't he?

We're sure that miracles will convince us when nothing else will – and not just any miracles, but miracles how and when we want them, personal miracles, extraordinary miracles we won't forget. Because if God is big and bright enough just once it will stay with us all our lives. Won't it?

Mary and Martha were no different: they wanted, *needed*, a miracle; they needed Christ to do something incredible, perhaps impossible. And not out of selfishness, not for the benefit of their faith, but simply out of love for their dying brother Lazarus. "Lord, he whom you love is ill" – a plain, heartfelt supplication. This was not presumptuous, or intrusive, or impolite. It is precisely what God asks us to do.

Psalm 50:15 distills it to the plainest of terms: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall honour me." Or Matthew 7:7-8: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." This is what we, as believers, are encouraged by God to do: to ask, seek, knock. And should we only confine our requests to trivial matters such as may be readily and efficaciously dispatched? Hardly! Ours is a God of impossibilities who declares himself as such: "I will go before you and will level the mountains, I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron" (Isaiah 45:2).

Mary and Martha were simply following the word of God. They had come to the limits of their human possibilities and were thus just arrived at the threshold of God's potential. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." Given the urgency of the situation, we may assume that they also asked Christ to hurry. He was on the far side of the Jordan River, about 17 miles from Bethany, when he received their message. If he hurried he could arrive later that night or early next morning. No doubt Mary and Martha expected him shortly, were waiting anxiously, counting down the hours, the minutes, to their hoped-for miracle. Just a touch and Lazarus would be well again.

But Christ, in his infinite and unfathomable wisdom, does not come when asked. He doesn't even send word that he will be late. He knows they will wait, worry, weep, wail – but he doesn't come.

And his explanation for his inaction is as puzzling as the inaction itself: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." What are we to make of this, for Lazarus' illness does indeed lead to death, even if only a death of four days? Or these words: "rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it"? Illness for God's glory; suffering for God's glory; so that the Son of God – that is, Christ himself – may be glorified through it? It is, to say the least, difficult to understand such reasoning, to reconcile it with our belief in a loving and just God. After all, what is Christ saying here? That he allows us to suffer so that he may be glorified? Is ours an insecure God who needs praise so desperately that he uses even the circumstances of our suffering to elicit it?

In order to understand what Christ means by his delay, by his seeming indifference to suffering, we, like Mary and Martha, must await his arrival – both in this story and in our own lives. We must wait. For it is only in waiting that the greatness of the miracle becomes apparent. It is only in waiting that we come to understand the immensity of Christ's love for us. It is only in waiting that we learn to allow God not merely to meet our needs but to exceed them utterly, to do that which we cannot even think to ask.

It is only in waiting that the greatness of the miracle becomes apparent.

Had Christ answered the message immediately and arrived in Bethany in time to lay his hands on a dying-but-not-yet-departed Lazarus, he would have done what he had done before, healed the sick – and of course spared Mary and Martha much grief. Great things, to be sure, but not perhaps in the realm of impossible things. Sick people do after all get better on occasion, even those deemed beyond help. It is difficult to say whether or not such a "miracle" would have persuaded people to believe in Christ, as happens in our text.

Or what if Christ had arrived just after Lazarus' death? Would the raising of Lazarus have been credited to him or to the ineptitude of Mary and Martha who somehow mistook their brother's sleep for death and had him entombed? It sounds ludicrous but I'm certain the annals of medical history contain more than a few dark tales of people being buried prematurely and miraculously raised to life by the rattle of a cart's wheels or the crow of a cock or the voice of a

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friend. I am certain that a well-schooled cynic or scientist could explain away the mystery of a man being "resurrected" only hours after his interment.

Four days later is quite another matter. That's rather more difficult to account for. The text specifically mentions the stench when the gravestone was rolled away; decomposition had already begun. Four days dead is dead indeed. And raised after four days by three simple words – that's a miracle by even the most exacting definition. Yet that's what Christ does, the impossible. He waits, and makes us wait, in order to do that which no one can do.

It is only in waiting that we come to understand the immensity of Christ's love for us.

If we have occasion to doubt that Christ understands us, sympathizes with us, is moved by our grief and pain, the story of Lazarus offers a poignant reminder that we are mistaken in our doubts. Mary and Martha, after waiting four eternal days for Christ's arrival, did not perhaps disbelieve that he loved them, but they clearly do express their puzzlement, even frustration, at his delay. Martha's first words to him are not words of greeting, not polite little words of understanding or dutiful submission, but words of remonstrance, of challenge; words not simply of grief but of grievance: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." I think we understand these words quite well – their rawness, their desperation, their almost childlike helplessness. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

They are also words of deep faith. And perhaps it is this inherently beautiful faith which so moves Christ when he hears them again, a short time later, from Mary. His reaction is in some ways as unexpected as his initial delay: our text says "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (the King James translation says "he groaned in spirit"), and a little later "Jesus began to weep." There are only three other occasions in the Gospels that mention Jesus in such distress: the first is in Luke, when Jesus, upon entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, weeps over the city as he anticipates the wars, the ruin, the suffering into which it will be plunged; the second occurs in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus, before his arrest, goes to pray that God might take from him the cup of suffering; the third occurs on the cross, as he drains that cup to the dregs. These are extraordinary circumstances, yet Jesus' sorrow upon beholding the

plain face of human suffering is no less intense. He weeps with Mary and Martha. He acknowledges the depths of their loss, the beauty of their faith.

We may be surprised at this because we tend to carry within us the notion that Christ must somehow be unaffected by the suffering he chooses not to end. For if it really hurt him, he would end it, wouldn't he? Why would an omnipotent God cry in vain? Why didn't he just come earlier? We don't understand this – and in fact the silence of God in the midst of human affliction is as readily ascribed to his absence as to his indifference. Just as the discernible presence of God in times of trial fortifies our faith, so the apparent absence of God in the midst of our pain can weaken faith. Suffering is of all experiences the crucible in which our faith is tested – both as individuals and as a species. For what do we do when the groaning of hundreds, thousands, even millions is not ended, not soothed, not quieted?

Among some Jewish survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust the belief that God had deserted them, had inexplicably turned his back and forsaken his chosen ones, was not uncommon. One such man was Elie Wiesel, a Romanian Jew, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Writing about his experiences in the camps (and for such experiences there is really no adequate language) he states quite plainly that for a time he lost his belief in God, lost it utterly—gave it up or had it taken from him, he doesn't say which. But it did return, eventually, and that return was predicated on a new understanding of God's relationship to human suffering. In his autobiography he writes,

> God accompanies his children into exile. What happens to us touches God. What happens to Him concerns us. We share in the same adventure and participate in the same quest. We suffer for the same reasons and ascribe the same coefficient to our common hope....[I]t is not our place to make decisions for God. He alone has discretion in the thousands of ways of joining His suffering to ours....[I]t is in this capacity [as a fellow sufferer] that He shatters our shell and moves us. How can we fail to pity a father who witnesses the massacre of his children by his other children? Is there a suffering more devastating, a remorse more bitter?[1]

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What if it is so? What if God indeed suffers, suffers for one as he does for millions? Does this thought reach us when we shake our fists impatiently, when we tremble with impotent rage, when our faith buckles as we wait in unbroken stillness for deliverance?

I wondered earlier if Christ weeps in vain. If we return to Bethany we'll see that he does not. For the expression of sympathy and of personal anguish is at once an expression of love – which is never in vain – and a prelude to more direct action, namely, the raising of Lazarus.

It is only in waiting that we learn to allow God not merely to meet our needs but to exceed them utterly, to do that which we cannot even think to ask.

Martha and Mary certainly did not imagine that the fact of their brother's death could be altered. His sickness Christ might have ended, but surely not his death. They say, "Lord, if you had been here, he would not have died." They do not say, "Lord, now that you are not here, return him to us from the grave." Their faith, though firm in the midst of trial, does not take them to this next step, to this very impossibility. The miracle they seek is for Lazarus to be raised from his sickbed, not from his tomb. Their estimation of Christ's power is considerable, but not limitless.

Is it so with us as well? Do the miracles we ask of God sell him short? Do we want some pocket-sized God whom we can pull out, like a palm pilot, to help us through the day to our desired end? If the story of Lazarus does anything, it turns our attention to *God's* desired end. Christ apparently wanted to raise Lazarus from the dead, not from his sickbed, and not with a touch of his wonder-working hand but with words: "Lazarus, come out." And why this? "So that the Son of God may be glorified," or, as he explains later to his disciples, "For your sake...so that you may believe." This is the key – for *our* sake! *Christ is not glorified by our fawning but by our faith.* And faith, in this instance, is based on waiting – waiting for God in our suffering, waiting so that the full extent of the miracle can be realized, waiting so that Christ can bring to us a new understanding of his love for us, waiting so that human expectation can be utterly eclipsed by the divine miracle.

The story of Lazarus challenges us to hope in God for impossible things and yet also to wait patiently and faithfully in the midst of our suffering for whatever it is he will do, whenever it is he will do it –

not by any means an easy task. For how do we wait? How do we suffer? Simone Weil, a philosopher, theologian, and social critic of the last century, herself well-versed in the language of affliction, offers the following counsel:

> [We who suffer, have] no part in the operation. [We] struggle like butterfl[ies] pinned alive into an album. But through all the horror [we] can continue to want to love. There is nothing impossible in that, no obstacle, one might almost say no difficulty. For the greatest suffering, so long as it does not cause the soul to faint, does not touch the acquiescent part of the soul, consenting to a right direction. It is only necessary to know that love is a direction and not a state of the soul...He whose soul remains ever turned toward God though the nail pierces it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe. It is the true center; it is not in the middle; it is beyond space and time; it is God.[2]

I do not know for what you are waiting, what miracles you have in mind; I do not know how long you have waited, how long you have suffered. But if in waiting and suffering there is no choice, in one thing at least choice remains: to love, to turn to God, to God who suffers with you, loves you, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who will come again.

And as you wait for your miracle, do not lose sight of the miracles that lie every day scattered around us. The Scriptures tell us that God has drawn us in loving kindness, that he numbers the hair on our heads, that our names are inscribed on his hands. Among the countless billions of names there are yours and mine. Such is God's love and faithfulness. May we remember it in our waiting and in our suffering.

Notes

1 Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 103-105.

2 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God,* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1951), p. 135.

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