



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

## The Perfect Storm John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a

I want to begin this sermon with a disclaimer. The title of this sermon is not one that I would ordinarily choose. As with many catch phrases, “the perfect storm” became popular with the book and movie of the same name even though it was first used nearly a hundred years ago. Now we hear it at every turn to refer to political, economic, and social circumstances. In general, a “perfect storm” is a critical situation which results from the combination of several powerful components, usually with catastrophic results. Without a doubt, Hurricane Sandy which raked our coast and devastated New Jersey, the New York City metro area, and much of New England was indeed “the perfect storm.” It was a convergence of different weather systems which created an even more devastating situation than the hurricane alone would have caused. And while there are numerous situations in life which fit such a description, I think the term is much overused. That is why I would not ordinarily use it for a sermon title.

Nevertheless, after reading the account of Jesus’ visit to the tomb of Lazarus, I realized that conditions for “a perfect storm” did exist. Let me explain.

We know the background of this story. Lazarus became ill and his sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that they were concerned for his health. Surprisingly, Jesus did not rush to the bedside of his dear friend. He suggested to his disciples that there was no need to worry and waited two days before traveling to Bethany. In the meantime Lazarus died and was buried in a cave, as was the custom.

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been buried four days. Martha met him first and pointed out that had Jesus been there her brother would not have died. They had a conversation about resurrection and then Martha went to get her sister Mary to see Jesus. Mary also reminded Jesus that had he been there sooner, Lazarus would not have died. Mary’s grief deeply touched Jesus and he asked to be taken to the tomb.

The scene at the tomb is tense. Mary and Martha are there, weeping over their brother's death, frustrated that Jesus did not come sooner, confused about the actions of their dear friend whom they believe to be the Messiah. A crowd has gathered prepared to grieve with the sisters as was common at the time, perhaps also curious to see what would happen having heard that Jesus had arrived. Jesus stands there pierced to the core over the death of his friend Lazarus and the deep grief of the sisters. He weeps. He does not just stand there wiping away an occasional tear—he weeps. I suspect he had one of those gut-wrenching, doubled over cries when you can't catch your breath and the only thing that helps is to have someone wrap their arms around you and tell you that it is going to be alright even though you don't believe it for a second.

Some people in the crowd are touched by this display of affection for the family, but others are put off saying, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" And you know that we wonder the same thing. Is that not a question we ask when someone we love is sick and dies? If God is great and God is good, why can God not make well those who are ill?

These accusations were not whispered. They were loud enough for all to hear, and Jesus certainly heard them. Our text says that Jesus was "greatly disturbed." It might mean that he began to cry again, but some scholars suggest that it means he was angry. Whether from grief or aggravation with the crowd or his own decision to tarry, we do not know, but he was quite upset.

Here is a family brokenhearted over the death of their beloved brother. Here is a community also grieving and questioning the motives and abilities of the one person who could have saved Lazarus' life. Here is Jesus grief-stricken over his friend's death, hurting for the sisters, and put off by the accusations of the crowd. Emotions swirl. Sorrow, disappointment, hurt, and anger combine and rotate within this gathering at Lazarus' tomb. The perfect storm.

What will happen? Mary and Martha could really lash out at Jesus, accusing him of betraying his friendship, of letting his friends down, of neglecting his God-given gift of healing. The crowd from the town could have murmured all sorts of speculations about Jesus, suggesting that he was a sham, a fraud, another would-be messiah who could not deliver. They could

have turned their backs on Jesus and walked away from the One who came for their sake.

And Jesus? Overwhelmed with grief, put out with the expectations of everyone else, angry that people would question his motives when it came to his dear friends, he could have turned and walked away. He could have thrown up his hands and said, "The heck with it all. I am done!" and walked away to find another town and another group of people who might respect the Son of God a bit more. He could have walked away from it all, figuring that if this experience of death was so difficult, how could he ever get through his own death.

All of these different emotions and reactions converged at Lazarus' tomb and created the potential for the perfect storm of human reaction that could have been disastrous for Jesus' ministry. Instead, Jesus took a deep breath and ordered the tomb to be opened. Despite Martha's protests that the stench would be horrible, Jesus insisted the stone be rolled away. He took a deep breath, looked to heaven, and prayed that God would help everyone there to understand. Then with a loud voice he called for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. And the formerly dead man came out to enjoy life again.

Death and grief offer opportunity for a perfect storm in our lives because so many forces combine at once to turn life upside down. We are buffeted and battered on all sides. God offers us hope, however. Throughout scripture, as we have heard several times this morning, God promises to wipe away our tears. Grief and tragedy will not cease on earth. The only guarantee for an end to tears will happen later when we leave behind the limitations of this earthly life. Until that time, however, God will wipe away our tears, meaning that God will provide comfort and care and assurance through all of life's challenges. To see Jesus sobbing uncontrollably before his friend's tomb reminds us that God does understand our intense pain and confusion. Jesus' insistence that the tomb of death be opened also reminds us that death is not the end of life. God will wipe away our tears and bring life out of death so that we can live again. God will not allow that "perfect storm" of grief, anger, and fear to overwhelm us and destroy our lives. Through God's direct compassion and the care of the community of faith, God will wipe away our tears so that we can see our way to life again. Thanks be to God! Amen.

November 4, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy God, Creator of all things, hear us now as we pray. We see your handiwork in the beauty of creation and in the beauty of the lives which have touched our own. We praise you, O God, because you are our God, and you have chosen to be in relationship with us, to form a covenant with a people who have been so careless with your grace, and to call us your children. Our hearts overflow with gratitude for the abundance of your blessings.

Living God, who is our light and hope, on this All Saints Day, we thank you for the gift of eternal life and for all those who, having served you well, now rest from their labors. We thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten, for those dear souls most precious to us, and especially for those we have remembered today. We praise you for their life and love and rejoice that they are surrounded by your mercy and now move in company with our Risen Lord. May their witness inspire us to a deeper and more active faith, worthy of the example they have set for us. By the lives they lived and the lessons they taught, let us recognize what it means to be called children of God. As we prepare to gather around your table, remind us that we are your saints not by our own inclination or strength but by the call and the redemption of Jesus Christ our Savior.

In this week when we have witnessed again the power of your creation, we also offer our prayers for those who have suffered the loss of life or property to the fury of wind and water. We give thanks for those who have worked heroically for the sake of others and ask your blessing upon those who are working to put the shattered pieces of their lives back in place. We pray for those in our own community and others for whom each storm evokes fear and worry as a painful reminder of deep losses experienced in the past. Grant to all who have known such loss a loving community to support them, patience and courage to do the hard work of rebuilding, and the assurance of your presence with them. As a people seeking to be agents of your love and mercy, help us to reach out with generous hands and compassionate hearts to all those whose needs overwhelm them. Teach us to offer comfort to those who mourn, healing and restoration to those who suffer illness, peace to those whose lives are filled with chaos or violence, and companionship to those who are lonely. Make of us lights to the dark places of our world that we might share the Good News of your transforming grace. At your table, may we be filled with your Spirit and empowered for the work to which you have called us. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord, our Alpha and Omega, our promise of Resurrection, our Life and Light. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister

All Saints Homily  
November 4, 2012

Within the past year death has parted us from a number of our friends whose memories still lighten our days and brighten our nights. The wound of death has lost some of its sting, but the absence left behind is still quite hollow and grim. We know that God has not abandoned us and the tears Jesus sheds at the grave of his friend Lazarus remind us that God does understand our sorrow.

Today we remember these friends and what they meant to us as individuals and as a church. We recognize the ways in which they helped build up this Body of Christ and we acknowledge the impact they had on our lives personally. We offer thanks to God for their lives and pray that peace will be the gift we enjoy. As we remember them we light candles, symbols of the eternal life they now enjoy and of the light they brought into our lives.

As a family of faith, we remember those friends in our Lakeside family who have died in the past year and whose light still shines brightly in the heart of God and in our hearts.

Erma Berry  
Jarrett Dickens

Beverly Bulluck  
Eddie Glasgow  
Don Scarboro

Walt Conner  
Carolyn Overton

Let us pray:

God of compassion,  
your Son Jesus blessed those who mourn,  
and wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus.  
Come near to us with your word of grace,  
for we are separated by death from friends who rest in you,  
and we carry with us a mountain of grief.  
Stay beside us in our distress  
and turn us toward the light of hope that pierces the clouds.  
Help us stand in that light, assured of your promise  
to bring us all together in the embrace of your loving arms;  
through Christ our Lord, who died and lives again. Amen.

Blair Gilmer Weeks  
*Standing in the Circle of Grief*  
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 55.