

Tombs, Tears, and Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

John 11:1-45

A colleague of mine used to say that the work of theology is “weaving together our stories with God’s story.” I’ve come to think of it in a slightly different way. I imagine us looking for the intersections between God’s story and ours – intersections that are already there, waiting to be discovered. Where do the two stories cross paths with each other? How does the biblical story help us understand ours better? How do our stories deepen our understanding of the Bible?

This week that task is easier than some weeks. For the lectionary offers us two resurrection stories, a sneak preview of the stories of Christ’s death and resurrection that we will be recalling over the next two weeks. The first depicts Ezekiel’s vision of a valley filled with dried up, sun-bleached bones. You can’t be any deader than that. And God asks him whether these dry bones can live. We don’t quite know what to make of Ezekiel’s response “Lord, you know.” He could be passing the buck – God only knows. Or he could be hedging his bets, knowing that God already has an answer. Then the famous stirring of the bones, their reconnecting, their adding sinew and muscle and skin. Then in a final act, breath enters their bodies and a vast multitude stands to its feet.

Ezekiel’s vision is clearly labeled. He does not claim to be reporting a historical event but a dream, a divine act of the imagination that pointed him to a deep theological reality – a time outside of time. But the historical setting for the vision is really important here. For in 587 BC the Babylonian army under King Nebuchadnezzar had captured Jerusalem, plundered it, and later razed it to the ground. The priest and prophet Ezekiel was among the first wave of captives to be taken from Jerusalem to Babylon after the holy city was destroyed. There he watched his people languish in a strange land. They despaired of ever returning to their home land, ever once again being the chosen people of God. Many would die there, never to return. Ezekiel’s vision, then, spoke of the resurrection of the Jewish nation, not the resurrection of individual bodies. God’s promise was that God would restore Israel to its rightful relationship with God, restore the

covenant God had with the people. It was a spiritual resurrection as much as it was a promise to return them to their homeland.

The story of Lazarus shares with Ezekiel's vision the absolute reality of death. Jesus' friend and brother to Mary and Martha in Bethany had fallen victim to an illness that would take his life. By the time Jesus arrived, the story tells us, he had been dead for four days. That is important, because in Jewish thought during Jesus' time, the spirit hovered near the body for three days before finally departing. After three days, death was final. The perfumes they used to mask the smell of decay had long since lost their effectiveness. Like the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision, the reality of death was unmistakable. Neither the Gospel writer nor Jesus is glossing over the pain and loss that accompany death. Lazarus was not just sleeping. He was gone.

John does not present this story as a vision, but as an event that took place at a particular moment in time. On his way to Jerusalem, where he would face the threats to his life that had been building for some time, he is called to the small village of Bethany, just outside the city. He waits before making the journey, but eventually arrives at the home of Mary and Martha. As soon as he arrives, he comforts them in their sorrow, even receiving their complaints that he had taken so long to get there, that he had not arrived in time to heal his friend, or at least be present in his final hours. Then in an act that stretches belief, he asks that the stone be rolled away, prays in thanks for God's promise, and calls Lazarus forth from the grave.

Biblical scholars have for centuries debated the meaning of the story. Did it actually happen as a historical event? Was it a story added later to foreshadow Jesus' own impending death and resurrection? If true, why would Jesus have tarried before coming in time to heal him rather than raise him from the dead? Was this an act of divine showmanship, letting beloved friends go through loss and death just to make a point?

Clear answers to some of these questions might elude us. But the messages we can trust, regardless of what we make of the story itself, are at least two. First, there are depths to the reality of our universe that are beyond our comprehension. Despite the evidence we see of God's care for us and our world,

God is also a God of mystery. God is at work in the world in unexpected ways. During our last worship service together in the sanctuary we sang “God moves in a mysterious way, God’s wonders to perform.” God doesn’t always act in ways that we anticipate, isn’t held captive to our wishes or plans. God loves a good surprise.

The second truth in John’s telling of the story is this: God’s love transcends life as we know it, even in death. In Christ, God is uniquely present among us, suffering with us, but also demonstrating God’s power over death. As we have been repeatedly reminded in recent days, in life and in death, we belong to God.

But what about those intersections with our own stories that I hinted at earlier? What are the connections for us? Let me suggest two.

In these days of pandemic, we are bombarded daily with news of sickness and death. We are being asked, even ordered, to remain in our homes in order to slow the spread of the virus. We are exiled from the normal places and routines that give us meaning, that promise freedom and self-direction. Ironically, in our homes we may feel homeless.

To be sure, ours is not an Exile like the Jewish captives in Babylon. But we recognize their lament; we, too, can become tempted to despair. Neither our nation nor the world has been razed to the ground or relegated to ashes or bleached bones or a dark tomb. But much is crumbling around us, and we will never return to quite the way things used to be. Something new will emerge from this time of crisis. We don’t know yet how we will be different, what those breath-filled bones will look like, what it would be like to walk out of these temporary graves we now inhabit. But for both Ezekiel and John, the spirit of God always brings new life. What a glorious vision it would be to imagine God’s breath, God’s spirit, God’s ruach, once again filling the lungs of those made breathless, our communities devastated by distance and political divide once again standing as a vast multitude to the glory of God! So there is an inspiring promise in these stories, even as we are still in the “ramping up” stages of this illness and its economic impact on our country, on our world, on our neighborhoods.

But it’s also true that these stories remind us of the need to acknowledge the reality of the world we live in. Ezekiel was a priest and would have avoided even

dried bones; contact with death would have made him ritually impure, unable for a time to do the work of a religious leader. But in that vision he followed God without hesitation into a valley full of death. Jesus, too, refused to turn away from the reality of Lazarus' death, the pain of loss, even the stench of the grave. Each of these men walked into the center of human pain and death, unafraid to confront the harshest of realities. That can't have been easy.

To be sure, this is not a call for us to ignore the warnings of health officials, to place ourselves and others in harm's way. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In our day, the reality check we most need to follow is recognizing that the threat of this virus is not just about our own health, but about the health of everyone we contact. The faithful response for us is to protect ourselves and our neighbors from infection, and conserve the medical resources of our healthcare system for those unable to protect themselves. This is a call to think far beyond our own wants and needs.

But it is also a call to give thanks for those who cannot avoid walking into the valleys of dry bones, cannot choose to walk away from the nearby tomb. Our health care workers, our first responders, yes, the clerks in grocery stores, pharmacies, and hardware stores walk daily in unsafe places. Our gratitude needs to be accompanied by our determination to protect them, to pray for them, and to assist them in whatever ways we can.

These days call for sacrifices of different sorts. Staying home is not selfishness when going out risks lives. Those who are putting their training and experience to use when it is needed to save lives are making sacrifices of a different sort, including threats to their own life and health as well as their families. For some of us, taking a break from the daily onslaught of traumatizing news involves a different kind of sacrifice, as does sorting through the dizzying array of predictions, cautions, opinions, and optimistic timelines.

But today we are called to a moment of centering peace. We are reminded yet again of the words of Psalm 23 that we can walk through the valleys shadowed in death without fearing evil. We can approach even the tomb listening to the Christ who called Lazarus forth from the dead. And we can look forward to a day of healing and reconciliation, of wholeness and peace. In the end, God will not be stopped. Julian of Norwich was a 14th century anchoress who nearly died from the

Black Plague. As a mystic, she had visions of Christ's passion and found herself meditating on it for the rest of her life. And she is perhaps best known for a single quote that speaks a word to us today. "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Sharpened in the fires of a deadly plague, these were not naïve or pietistic words. They gave voice to her conviction that in the darkest hours, when all seems lost, we find ourselves still in the presence of a loving God. May that be so for us in these days as well.

Amen.