

Prophesy and Raise the Dead: Joining Ezekiel and Lazarus

A sermon for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, preached by the Bishop, the Right Reverend Thomas James Brown, for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 29 March 2020.

The Bishop of Vermont spoke recently about how this pandemic creates, right now, a sense of being exiled. We are not gathered in our houses of worship, we are not celebrating the Eucharist, we are not at school, we are not circling around for coffee at the local diner, or going to band concerts, or anything else. We're staying in for the common good because this virus can make many of us sick, overwhelm our medical teams, and for some of us, it will cause death.

Today we have an Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, and a Gospel reading from St. John both of which show us who God is, and what God does. God's response to exile is return and restoration; God's response to death is resurrection.

Let's put these on a timeline. When the Prophet Ezekiel prophesies in the valley of those dry bones he does so during the exile. God's people had been carted off to Babylon, their Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and they were left wondering if this was the end. The raising of Lazarus occurs immediately after the authorities reject Jesus, and before the Passover and his Passion. It's a sign-story—pointing us in the direction of God's nature.

It's not too much to say that we're cut-off too. This is the closest thing to captivity most of us have known. Now, let's be clear: I'm extremely privileged, have plenty of food, am not enslaved, have internet, a marriage and a home, a savings account, family, and a faith community throughout a beautiful land with resilient people—that's true for most of us, though not all. Still, we've arrested our routines, a robust economy, and our sacred rituals. We trust they'll return, but we don't know when, and we're getting clear that life will be inalterably changed. Into this moment God enters, as God always does, and shows us how to move from death into life.

Ezekiel himself doesn't bring the bones to life because he doesn't know if they can be brought to life; God encourages Ezekiel, and then God acts and life is restored. What God says is, 'Prophesy to these bones'—so Ezekiel speaks as directed. "As I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then God said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'

Right here we have to stop. Ezekiel had a choice. And so do we. We are united in a kind of exile, facing a virus that disrupts, diseases, and destroys. Will we visualize new life and make it happen? Ezekiel said, "I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

Breath and life. It's a recipe for what to cook just now. I'm beginning to understand breath and life in new ways, or at least to claim more lovingly the gospel-shaped actions to reciprocate, to trust, and to be kind.

When my grandparents opened a funeral home in the upper peninsula of Michigan they were already used to being around dead bodies and grieving families. As newly-weds they apprenticed in funeral homes in cities and market towns. Suddenly they were owners, and newcomers in a cross-roads hamlet of 600 people, where everybody was related to each other. Think Palmyra, Jefferson, and South Paris. It was the early 1940s, and while they might have known about death and formaldehyde, about caskets and flowers and cemeteries, they had to learn to reciprocate, and to earn and to give trust. Farmers and copper miners taught my grandparents new ways to interact. Slowly, kindness fostered trust, and the little community tutored them to speak new languages, or at least to try, and to share. George & Marion Brown couldn't be the experts like they had been, they had to stop and listen; they had to learn.

When St. John tells us the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, he makes us stop and listen, too. The words come at the very end, "Unbind him and let him go." Lazarus's family and friends, his neighbors, have something to do, and do we.

At the chapel at New College Oxford there is an exquisite sculpture of Lazarus by Jacob Epstein. Lazarus's head is twisted halfway around, some of his limbs remain bound with the strips of cloth, some are freed. It's not clear exactly which direction the statue is facing. In this altogether foreign moment, we might imagine ourselves turning ourselves, along with Lazarus, in the direction of reciprocity, trust, and kindness. Let's take our places to unbind and to let go.

We'll have to learn how to handle this, knowing full well that we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. Help shall come from sources of which we are not always conscious; we might trust that it will be unbounded and that it will rise up from within us, appearing in all sorts of people and in unexpected places. Reciprocity.

It's also true that some of us will help most right now by waiting, taking these days at home for preparation and prayer. Imagine praying not so much from the ground, but from the sky. If we're quiet enough we'll begin to see the situation—painful and death-dealing, as well as hopeful and life-giving—not only from our point of view, but also from another point of view...it will look different. Trust.

This will not be the last pandemic, nor the last disaster. As North Americans we've been largely insulated from the worst of these upsets. Animals and humans in other parts of the world have been living with this kind of uncertainty for a long time, while much of the world paid minimal attention. A place where I see light and hope is hearing Americans acknowledge that returning to normalcy of the past years, with unaddressed injustice, is not an option.

Instead, we seem now to be listening for breath and wind, hearing again the depth of God's faithfulness to us, and beholding the person of Jesus who right now beckons us to join him in raising the dead.

There is a story from the desert tradition. Monastics would give each other advice, human advice, down-to-earth truths, such as "stay in one place, pray every day, let your everyday routines become means by which you control your desire to be the greatest sinner or the greatest saint." A monk questioned Abba Hierax, saying, "Give me a word. How can I be saved?" The old man said, "Sit in your cell, and if you are hungry, eat; if you are thirsty, drink; only do not speak evil of anyone, and you will be saved." Kindness.

There is no grand apocalyptic time to prepare for—including this pandemic. Think of humanity's salvation as a slow-leavening of the Spirit among us. We're not serving God "at some point"—whether that's when we're less tired, when we're gathering in our churches and schools again, or when we think we're more spiritual—we join one another in friendship with God right now.

How exactly, you might ask.

By taking our lead from Lazarus's family and friends, unbinding and letting go the deepest gospel truths of reciprocity, trust, and kindness; by listening carefully to God who gives a prophecy so that when we leave the dry valley of our houses, we'll join hands with one another to share breath and life.

NOTES: *The Gospel according to John: A commentary* by Raymond Brown, S.J., (Fortress Press, 1988); an essay, *Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup* by Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard; *The Desert Tradition Still Speaks* (Abingdon Press, 2019, p. 18); I'm grateful to my friend Fr. Martin L. Smith for the reference to Epstein's sculpture of Lazarus at New College.