

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Four years ago, I had no idea what Lent was, but each of the three Lenten Seasons since I first learned about Lent, I have been more and more convinced that I have finally figured out what Lent is. The first year, I learned that it was a season of repentance, self-examination, and giving things up, so I thought I ought to give up caffeine, chocolate, and Netflix. So basically... I gave up happiness. Last year, I learned Lent was also about taking things on, so I took on every spiritual discipline I could think of... and also gave up happiness. This year, since I have now learned that Lent is about being attentive, I thought I should be especially attentive to all things related to the incarnation and bodies in order to become disciplined in all possible areas of life... while also giving up happiness. Happily for all of you, the resurrection is not contingent on my Lenten success.

At this point, I am convinced that I will never have a firm grasp on what Lent actually is or what I am supposed to do during this season, but as far as I can tell, Lent is a lot of things. It *is* a season of repentance and of giving things up; it *is* a season for self-examination and for attentiveness and for discipline; but Lent is also (I think) a time for joyous anticipation. As Christians, we understand and experience everything in light of the resurrection; we can live well in the face of death because we look forward to resurrection.

In the commentary, Feasting on the Word, Veronica Miles tells us that Lent is the season where *we yearn for resurrection and the unbinding that releases us to dream beyond the boundaries and experience life anew. To dream beyond the boundaries is to imagine a world in which wholeness, well-being, health, and prosperity are normative expressions of human existence and to partner with the God of life in making that dream a reality* (FOTW 140). We have no choice but to participate in death, but we are invited to participate in resurrection. In Jesus, the lines between death and life are blurred. The natural is permeated with the supernatural.

Lent is the season where we most feel the tension between the finality of death and the hope of resurrection. This is the season where we are unbound and invited to be like the dry bones and like Lazarus, to allow ourselves to have life breathed into us, to become infused with the Spirit of God, which brings us hope. We are invited to believe in a reality of unlimited potential, to believe in a reality where death does not get the last word, but rather where life and hope are abundant. Lent carries us from Ash Wednesday to Easter. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We will be bound and buried, and our bones will dry out. We need resurrection.

In the Ezekiel text, God guides Ezekiel to the valley and invites him to prophesy and speak life into the dry bones. God asks Ezekiel if he thinks these bones can live again. While Ezekiel is uncertain, he still has faith that God can do something. He says “oh Lord God, you know,” because even when he is uncertain whether or not anything can be brought back from death, he trusts that God knows better than he. Even when Ezekiel is unsure of whether or not the bones that represent a consistently covenant-breaking Israel currently in exile can possibly live again, bodies are formed on the bones and life is breathed into them again. They are resurrected. God’s desire and power to resurrect and give life is not dependent on our past performance or our current ability to believe.

The dry bones in Ezekiel represent a people void of hope. Their Temple has been destroyed, they are in a foreign land, and many have died or have been taken. They have nothing; they are living death and have lost all hope. God shows Ezekiel this death and the possibility for resurrection. Even when Ezekiel is uncertain of whether or not God's power works beyond death, God acts. God creates life and restores life. God invites Ezekiel to participate in this resurrection, and Ezekiel speaks and together they bring forth life. New bodies are formed around the dry bones, and God breathes new life into them. This is the breath which moves through the Lazarus story, the same breath that breathed a crucified Jesus into resurrected life, the same breath that moves through each one of us. This breath is what moves in this world making possible an impossible resurrection and new life, (FOTW 127).

Like Ezekiel, Martha confesses her trust in God's power despite her own uncertainty. She confesses that Lazarus will rise again on the last day, but then Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Martha again confesses that she believes this, but what Martha does not realize is that Jesus is not only promising a future resurrection, but a present one. What Martha merely understands as future potential, Jesus brings as present reality (NIB 694). Jesus identifies himself not only as someone who is going to bring life, but one who is bringing life now and who has always brought life.

I have to confess that this is hard for me to believe. I am utterly baffled by the resurrection and the idea that death does not get the last word. I have never been less certain of the resurrection than when my brother called me from Afghanistan weeping after he had killed for the first time, and again when he watched a friend die for the first time. I cannot understand how those deaths are not final. I cannot understand how Jesus brings hope and life when death hurts everyone it touches so very deeply. I find it hard to have hope for new life when there are bodies lost in mudslide and lost in the sea. I find it hard to have hope for resurrection when there is constant conflict all over the world. I find it hard to believe in hope when we are surrounded by debilitating physical and mental ailments, when despair seems so near and so overwhelming. When it comes to suffering and death, I tend to become rather hopeless. So, like Martha, I confess that I believe in Jesus and the resurrection even though I am certain I must not really understand. Martha confesses that Jesus is the resurrection, but is surprised when he fulfills his promise. In the midst of death, God acts and we are surprised.

Jesus does not attempt to dismiss suffering and death. Our hope does not make death any less terrible. The resurrection is *so* powerful because death is *so* bitter. Jesus weeps when he is told where Lazarus is; our translation says he was "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." I have always assumed this to mean that Jesus was sad and was moved with compassion, but all the commentaries say that the Greek here actually means Jesus was more likely angry, indignant, and deeply troubled. Jesus was angry, indignant, and troubled because death was never meant to be. Our creation narrative does not anticipate death. God creates life and expects creation to keep on creating. So when death comes, God is angry, indignant, and troubled... and then God acts. God resurrects.

In the same way that God's existence does not depend on our belief in God's existence, God resurrects even when we least expect and least understand resurrection. Even when we become

hopeless in the face of death, God resurrects. It was God who brought Israel out of exile and God who gave Lazarus life, and God who continues to breathe life into creation. Even during the Lenten Season of repentance and even when we are most aware of death, God invites us to see things how God sees things. We are invited to imagine, expect, and participate in a reality in which death is not the end and in which life and hope are most powerful. Every year, even if we lose hope and even if we do not understand, Easter will come.