

“An Old Well”

Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice; *
Let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.¹

* * *

This fifth Sunday in Lent, we have readings that speak of despair, despair that leads to hope. Ezekiel wonders what he is to do with a valley of dry bones. Mary and Martha wonder how they will go on without their brother. The psalmist pleads, wonders, and waits. We may feel profound resonance with these readings as we wonder how we are to live in a world where war and unrest are everywhere.

Ezekiel’s situation may be the strangest. Presented with a desolate landscape full of dry bones, God tells him to prophesy to them. The bones are brittle, lifeless, and useless. They are the memorial to an ancient, unremembered event. Yet this is the place to which God brings Ezekiel from Babylon, another place of despair.

Babylon, the place of exile for the Jews, is a continual reminder of the loss in battle to Nebuchadnezzar. Each day, they wake up in houses that are not homes, and to a language and food that are not their own. Their masters treat them like cheap entertainment. They say, “dance for us and sing some of those quaint songs you’re your home in Israel.”

God transports Ezekiel to a foreign valley. It must have felt like a cruel joke to him. He and all the Israelites want to go home, not to a place that is as barren. Then Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the lifeless bones. It adds insult to injury. Yet Ezekiel is faithful and prophesies. What comes next is beyond our comprehension. The bones begin to rise and reattach—foot bone to ankle bone to shin bone to knee bone, and so forth. As he continues to prophesy, the bones are connected with sinew, covered with muscle, inhabited with organs, and finally covered with flesh. They are resurrected.

God’s word has power even when spoken by a mortal. What is bleak, even more bleak than exile in Babylon, can be turned around because God’s word has the power to do so. God’s word can also revive and restore the living. The people of Israel may feel lost and even abandoned by God, but if God’s word is in their hearts, minds, and mouths, wonders will occur. Their lifeless souls will be raised, and God will take them home.

They pleaded, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD.”

Mary and Martha lament their brother, Lazarus who died while they waited for Jesus to come. They are put out that Jesus did not arrive sooner. They had sent word to him while Lazarus was still alive, and Jesus took his sweet time coming. Despite their pique, they also testify to Jesus’ status as the Messiah, “the one coming into the world.” They have not fully grasped to what they have testified. They do not comprehend what the Messiah, or “coming into the world,” means.

¹ Psalm 130 The Book of Common Prayer, p 784.

The Gospel does not tell us how they respond when Lazarus exits the tomb alive. We do not know if they gasped, fainted, rushed to Lazarus, bowed down to Jesus, raised their hands in praise to God, or ran away from a dead man walking.

They lamented, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD.”

A few years ago, I read a novel called *The Wind-up Bird Chronicles* by Haruki Murakami. At one point in the book, the main character, Toru Okada, who has lost his job and whose wife has left him, is exploring an abandoned property. He finds a dry well there. Over the course of several chapters, he begins to explore the well and eventually decides to search its depths. He finds that when he is above ground, the sky is cloudy, and Tokyo’s lights obscure the stars. However, from the depths of the well the sky sparkles. Despite forebodings, he sits at the bottom of the well through the night watching the starry sky.

He was amazed, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD.”

There is a saying, “May you live in interesting times.” I always thought of this as a blessing with dark overtones. It reminds me of another quote, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” It goes on “it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,”² We live in times that show the best and worst of humanity. There is no way around but through.

We cry, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD.”

You and I sit at the bottom of a well. We can sit looking at the walls or we can look up and cry out to the Lord. If we choose to look up, something different and hopeful is revealed. Just as the bones showed Ezekiel the power of God’s word and the dead brother revealed to Mary and Martha what the Messiah meant, the darkness of our well shows us we have been missing something. The darkness of our times can breed despair or urge us on toward hope.

During the recent pandemic, everyone wondered when we would return to normal, but the old normal did not return. In the same way that the old normal did not return after Pearl Harbor, JFK’s assassination, Vietnam, or 9/11. Events like these create seismic shifts in us and in our world. We can long for the old normal, which is long gone, or we can take the opportunity to look up out of the well at what is being revealed to us.

Let us live through these abnormal times that are being redeemed by an ever-loving God who is full of compassion and mercy. Let us, as new people redeemed by God, know our cry is being answered in ways that we cannot imagine.

Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD...
My soul waits ...
for with the Lord there is mercy;
With the Lord there is plenteous redemption.
Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD.³

² Charles Dickens, *The Tale of Two Cities*, public domain.

³ Ibid pp784-785.