

“Out of the Depths”

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. Amen.

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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 pandemic surrounds the globe.

Ezekiel’s situation may be the strangest. Presented with a desolate landscape full of dry bones he is told by God 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 from Jerusalem for Ezekiel and his people is a continual reminder of the loss in battle to Nebuchadnezzar. Each day they wake up to houses that are not homes, and to language and food that are foreign. Their masters treat them like an act in a minstrel show telling them to sing and dance some of those quaint songs from back home in Israel.

God’s transporting Ezekiel to this foreign valley must feel like a cruel joke. He and all the Israelites want to go home not to a place that is as barren as this. Then he is asked to prophesy to the lifeless. 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 done and so forth. As his prophecy continues the bones are connected with sinew, covered with muscle, inhabited with organs and finally covered with flesh. They are resurrected.

As George Carlin once said, “You don’t need to be Fellini to figure that one out.” 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. Just as God’s word can revive long dead men, it can 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 up and God will return them home.

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Mary and Martha lament their brother Lazarus’s, death, but they are also put out that Jesus did not come earlier. They had sent word to him while Lazarus was still alive and Jesus took his sweet time in coming. Yet, they also testify to Jesus’ status as the Messiah, “the one coming into the world.” Even as they testify they approach Lazarus’s tomb warning of the stench within. They have not fully

grasped what they have testified to. They do not comprehend what Messiah, or “coming into the world” mean.

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 maybe ran away because they were in the presence of a dead man walking. They had no idea how their laments would be answered.

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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 been abandoned by his wife, is exploring an uninhabited property. On the grounds is a well, a dry well as it turns out. Over the course of several chapters Okada begins to explore the well and eventually descends into it. 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 wants to sit in the bottom of the well through the night in order to see the starry sky.

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Over these last two weeks some of us have tried to distract ourselves with our usual pastimes or by taking up new ones to relieve the ennui. Others sit staring at the walls, wondering when this will all end. Some try to find a way around the rules and regulations by flouting them. But as Bishop Susan Goff said to a group of clergy this week, “We are not called to find ways around this, but rather ways through it.”

You and I, we sit in a well. We may be at the bottom and we may not. We are not called to sit looking at its walls. What we are called to do is look up in wonder. The walls that surround us can enclose us and restrain us. They also open us up to another perspective. Just as the bones show us the power of God’s word and the dead man shows us the power of God’s love in Christ, the darkness of the well and of our time shows us we have been missing something.

We can hunker down and get through this pandemic waiting for things to return to normal, but old normal will never exist again. No more than old normal existed after Pearl Harbor, Kennedy’s assassination, or 9/11. Events like this one create seismic shifts. We can long for old normal or we can take this opportunity to look up out of the well at what has opened up for us. Let us live into a new normal that is redeemed by an everloving 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 they could never ask or 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.