

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Sermon 3.26.23

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." <sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then he 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." <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." <sup>12</sup>Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

### **John 11:1-6, 17, 30-45**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was....

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days...

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. <sup>32</sup>When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup>Jesus began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord,

already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup> When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." <sup>45</sup>

Ezekiel was a Temple priest. He lived at the time of Babylon's ascendancy in the region. It would take Israel, Babylon would. It would take Judea a while later, and Jerusalem with it. It would take the Temple, desecrate it before eventually destroying it altogether, stone by stone, burning the mortar that held it stone to stone, a painstaking process, cruelty meted out over months.

This was the cause of so much of Ezekiel's horror: the desecration of the Temple by people who just wanted to be cruel. Bring into holy places precisely what is disallowed. Do, or depict the doing of, things explicitly forbidden. Trolling, you might say. Maybe even the Babylonian Army had its punks.

As for Ezekiel, he was among the first wave of exiles, taken from conquered lands to the heart of the empire. He was among the first Judeans taken into Babylon. That speaks to his status. Conquering empires always took the most promising people first, the strong, the influential. Remember that feeling in gym class when the captains were picking their teams? You sort of wanted to be picked first. There was honor in that. But it was to play a game you really hated, so maybe you'd prefer not to be picked at all...?

I don't suppose anyone like Ezekiel would ever want to be picked to play on team Babylon. But he was, chosen and brought, among the first. He was *that* important. He was that influential.

What's more, it does seem that he had a long, peaceful life amidst the new empire. His book of prophecy includes visions he received or experienced over the course 22 years, six of them, from 593 to 571 BCE, all recorded in good order, even dated.

Not all books of prophecy are so easy to track. Most are like one side of a conversation, a conversation between historical or social event and prophetic voiced response, spoken from a very specific moment or from a long series of very specific moments. When all you get is the spoken response, it's a matter of puzzling together the larger context, the spurring event. What was happening in the world that garnered this response from this long-ago prophet? It's a puzzle. It's a dot-to-dot, but of a really complex picture with only a few dots far apart from one another. Fifteen dots to put together a picture of two nations, comprised of twelve tribes, and their feckless kings overcome by an empire which would itself be overcome by another empire, with a few prophet-

poet-priests there with their receptive minds and vivid imaginations to encounter and proclaim some meaning of all this terrible trauma.

This is certainly the case with the books of the twelve so-called minor prophets, shorter works from shorter-term events.

This is even the case with the three so-called major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, these whose time of actively prophesying seems to have spanned decades, or in Isaiah's case lifetimes, three people apparently prophesying in his name.

But of these three, Ezekiel is the most orderly, the most evident as to what he is responding to.

He must have had an orderly place to keep his things in exile. He may even have had a reliable scribe in exile. As much as he held in contempt the Babylonian exile, he doesn't seem himself to have suffered, except the judgement he felt from the Lord as regards the people.

Ezekiel was certain the sorry state of the people of God was a direct result of their having abandoned the right ways of their Lord. They'd gone their own way of injustice and malpractice. Things had gotten way out of balance in Judea, in Israel too. Ezekiel was sure destruction, desecration, exile: these were all punishment from the Lord.

One of his visions even featured the leaving of the Lord's glory from the Temple. Just as when the Temple had been built, and the Ark of the Covenant had at last found its place in the Holy of Holies, and the presence of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, in light and smoke finally filled the Temple, now, half a millennium later, it would leave—the presence, the glory. It would all leave. And Ezekiel would see it, the light and smoke now but scrawled graffiti and smoldering rubble.

Have you ever felt the life go out of a place?

Ezekiel seems to have suffered the weight of this judgment—though he moreover thought that weight was the people's to bear. *He* had done right. *He* had been faithful. It's that the larger politics of the people had become debased. And now it had come to this—though, granted, it was a state not everyone suffered, rag and bone, tooth and claw. But that fails to account for the boring pain of humiliation, desecration.

This is hard for us to imagine, I bet. It's hard for *me* to imagine. The fact is my culture, my way of life, has nearly never been subsumed by another's. Mine has always been dominant.

But there was that scene in *The Man in the High Castle*, a book I haven't read and a TV show I did watch. A counter-history, it imagines a world in which the axis powers won the Second

World War, the allied powers were crushed, humiliated. In a scene in a shop in the neutral zone of the American mountain west, a shop specializes in Americana, where Nazis and Japanese imperialists like to pick over the detritus of my culture, collect it as memorabilia the way white people might hang dream catchers from their cars' rearview mirrors. It was a good enough TV show that this particular scene had me feeling it in my viscera, the shame of having been subdued and commodified, if only imagined so.

And, no that I think about it, there was that one time when a friend who taught at a private elementary school with a vaguely spiritual mission was using the symbols and colors of Advent on her bulletin boards in December. She's an artist, so what she managed to do with felt and chalk was beautiful, really beautiful. But the terms in which she defined Advent, as a time in early winter when days are short and there's more darkness than light, were facile, and mostly wrong. There was no talk of penitence. There was no talk of salvation, our need for it, or of a savior, the coming of whom.

And I get it, the Church subsumed pagan symbols and rituals when it was first ascendant, appropriated them to new liturgical purpose. I get it, what goes around comes around. But it still bummed me out, and made me feel alienated from my friend. "Can I have my stuff back? You're using it wrong."

The decline of the Church: it does bum me out, bore at me like a blister.

The Judeans, the Israelites, the likes of Ezekiel: they lived with that for fifty years. The exile lasted from 586-536 BCE. Not that long in the grand scheme of things, but nearly a lifetime's length.

The prophets did their prophesying from that place: shame and attendant blame.

Until at last, a glimpse, glimpse by glimpse, a dawn of hope.

Ezekiel's famous vision, which we just heard read, is one of the earlier visions of resurrection in scripture. It's commonly thought that resurrection is a Christian innovation, that prior to Jesus' resurrection there was no imagining for such a thing. It's commonly thought any thought of the afterlife had no truck in Judaism.

This isn't correct. We get a whiff of resurrection thinking in the Book of Job, in the Book of Daniel. And there's this, in the Book of Ezekiel.

What might be correct about such distinctions is that, in Judaism, resurrection was hoped for mostly as a communal event. All Israel would rise and live again, as seen and promised in this valley of the dry bones. Where Ezekiel finds himself is, in essence, a killing field, a site of a

massacre or at least a mass grave. Likely the result of Babylon coming, it's grim, though there's a merriment here too: merriment in the vision of bones rising and gathering bone to its bone. The negro spiritual that this vision inspired is a merry one, *Dem Bones*, with its half-tone ascent up the scale—and then its descent, a vocal challenge of staying in tune. Like all negro spirituals, which are born of enslavement, amidst what's grim is also a defiant merriment—that the last and least on earth shall be first and foremost in the reign of God, and if the enslaved have nothing else (and they did have *nothing* else) then they at least had that. No wonder the masters didn't want them to learn to read. The only book most households had was a Bible, which they were right to try to keep from their enslaved. They might get ideas.

Christianity thinks also of the individual, which might be due largely to this encounter between Jesus and Lazarus, this encounter where Jesus and Lazarus essentially trade places. Here Jesus comes from among the living in order to release someone from the dead—and Jesus will leave this encounter all but dead while Lazarus is alive once more. This will be the event that finally draws the attention of those who would kill Jesus, but also the will of those who would kill.

They'd stalled on what they knew they needed to do. They feared the crowd.

They'd stalled—long enough.

Now was the time.

I think this is why Jesus wept, for what it's worth. I think he wept because he knew this was the thing that would bring about his own death—and, as fully cognizant as he seems to have been throughout this gospel narrative—that this is how it would end for him, that this is where it all was going from the beginning not only of his ministry but truly from the beginning of time—I think he'd come to love being alive, and he didn't want to die.

Surely, this is how to account for some of the details in this story. How it emphasizes Jesus' friendships with Mary and Martha, how it underscores how he apparently felt about these people, stating indeed that he *loved* Martha and her sister, that he *loved* Lazarus, that he would later share the touching encounter with Mary as she oiled his feet and wiped them with her hair: surely implied in the depth of these relationships is the pleasantness of being alive, the deep blessedness of what is also simple and common. Friendship. A human touch.

John's Jesus is, of all the four depictions of Jesus (in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the most ethereal, the most other-worldly. According to John, Jesus has an almost cool equanimity about himself. Everything he says has these many layers of meaning, as if he's always speaking over the heads of everyone around him.

What's more, when it comes to the so-called Farewell Discourse and High Priestly Prayer, which he's remembered to have offered his disciples on the night of his arrest, his ability to articulate, calmly, all that's about to happen and all that it means, has fueled centuries of debates, and subsequent heresies, that he didn't *actually* suffer the cross, as he never *actually, truly* lived—not in any embodied way, like, not with an actual body that actually had needs and functions, that would actually suffer pain and even death.

According to some under the influence of the Gospel of John, Jesus only *appeared* to suffer, an early case of deep-fake.

This is a heresy, of course, because the whole point of Christianity is to wrap the body up into the story of salvation. And this scene, if few others in the Gospel of John, strongly underscores this. Jesus lived as a man, made friends and became even very close to a couple, a few. And all this made leaving this life, even if bound for glory, something he didn't want.

Forget the suffering on the cross. That would be bad enough. But there was also this: leaving all this simple blessedness behind.

I confess, I like a Jesus who formed attachments. I've never been into the whole Zen detachment stuff.

It's said this scene is John's Garden of Gethsemane. In the other three gospel narratives, it's remembered: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane grieving his own needful death, begging God to take this cup of suffering from him, though ultimately obeying the will of God: "Yet not my will, but thine be done." John doesn't feature this familiar scene. It's said instead this is John's mournful, desperate version of the same.

Interesting, isn't it, that in Gethsemane, Jesus is remembered to have suffered alone. His disciples had fallen asleep even as he asked that wait up awake, so Jesus suffers in Gethsemane alone. Here, Jesus suffers indeed for not being alone, suffers for all that leaving this life will have him leave behind. Friends: Mary and Martha and Lazarus. They would live on, and he would be gone.

The bystanders assumed Jesus wept because he loved Lazarus and was sad he was dead.

I think they got the first part right.

Lazarus would live, and Jesus would die, and Christianity would imagine a resurrection both as it wrapped up into it the whole community, the whole nation, indeed the whole creation, but also the individual, the creature made of God's making and redeemed in God's self-giving.

Our walk to the cross grows short: less than two weeks. Our vision for what lies beyond its menace expands with every moment in worship, like this one.

Thanks be to God.