

A Noise and a Rattling
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Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹ 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. ²He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ ⁴Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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.’

⁷ 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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.’ ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ 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.” ¹²Therefore 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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 11:1-45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ ⁴But 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.’ ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ ⁸The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ ⁹Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not

stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ ¹¹After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’ ¹²The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ ²³Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ ²⁴Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ ²⁵Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ ²⁷She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’ ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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.’ ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ ³⁷But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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 for four days.’ ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.’ ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴The 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.’

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Transformation. It's everywhere this Lent, taking things that seemed dead and bringing them to vibrant life. Our little plants here have been quietly growing, growing, growing. And most of the time that is us, too, quietly growing, growing, growing. But sometimes that growth comes in spurts and bursts and noise and rattling. Both kinds of growing, they're uncontrollable. Think about it. Have you ever tried to stop yourself from growing, in height or in knowledge? We can't stop it. Sure we can refuse to absorb new information but it persists, rubbing against us and causing friction making us at least marginally different. Parents know that growing cannot be stopped, despite the sometimes feverish prayers that children would stay the same size for just a little longer and at least get **some** wear out of those jeans / shoes / specialty sports equipment.

We, like Ezekiel, might look at dry bones, bones bleached white, bones clearly empty of marrow, of anything resembling, remembering of life, and think that there is no way **those** can grow. But God pipes in with "ah, ah, ah, not so fast" and then does what we think unimaginable. And we cannot stop God bringing life from what looked to be dead. There is a specific significance to Martha's telling that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Professor Veronica Miles explains, "It has been four days since Lazarus's death, marking the completion of the soul's journey from life to death. His soul no longer lingers near the body, indicating that Lazarus is truly dead."¹ God pipes in again with "ah, ah, ah, not so fast, Martha." We cannot stop Jesus from bringing life from he who looked to be dead.

This is the evidence of hope, the tangible, imaginable evidence of hope. But there is caution to be heard. Not caution in having hope, no. Caution in demanding that evidence of hope appear in a specific way, that life appear, or reappear, in a specific way. Martha and Mary wanted hope to look like Jesus' arrival before Lazarus had died, keeping him alive, keeping him, and them, from encountering death. But hope came far differently, and later,

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 142.

than they imagined. Ezekiel had hope for the people of Israel who had been scattered seemingly hopelessly, irretrievably by exile. And God made a promise to make them a whole people again.

We might get hung up on the fact that the people have yet to all return to Israel. To that, I share a favorite quote of mine from theologian John Dominic Crossan. He said, “My point...is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”² I bring this up lest we think that God does not carry through on this promise and thus decide we cannot believe that God is not a God of hope and transformation. The people of Israel remain - what once was a remnant has persisted for millennia. They may not be in one land but they have returned to life from seemingly impossible circumstances. The story of the bones is symbolic and we are meant to hear it and understand it as such. The story proclaims that God transforms, that there is reason to hope. Don't try to limit what hope and transformation might look like because God does so much more. This is the good news of our God.

Let us pray: God, bring life where we see only death, we pray. Amen.

² https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/43692.John_Dominic_Crossan