

Being Complete

As many of you know, before Covid each and every Halloween, we loaded up the van with some of our young people and drove to Oahu cemetery.

And at the edge of the cemetery, we held a brief service with some readings, some songs, and even some incense!

The incense stopped after I nearly burned my foot off with it, but that's another story!

But the reading we shared every year, there at the edge of this old graveyard, is the one that we heard this morning from the prophet Ezekiel.

The reading that asks the age old question.

The question that has haunted a trembling humanity ever since humanity first came to experience God:

"Will these bones live again?"

For our youngsters, who often think of themselves as immortal, it's an important reminder that they are not.

That life is brief.

Fragile.

And easily lost.

But that question, "will these bones live again?" resonates in many other places as well.

Just this week, the nation is anticipating the first indictment of a former United States president, with several more indictments likely to follow.

Rather than greeting this news with a sense of shame or contrition, the news has been greeted by the former president with accusations of political bias, and a call to his supporters to rise up and protest.

The consequence of these calls to disregard the rule of law undoubtedly cause the structures and beams of our democracy to tremble these days.

In a system that absolutely depends on common agreement between all of us in acknowledging and affirming certain fundamental truths, when those truths are no longer acknowledged, no longer accepted, the question must be asked of our democracy:

“Will these bones live again?”

The prophet’s question not only looms over our national landscape.

It looms over our backyard here at the church — as so many of our fellow human beings are camped out on the side of muddy sidewalks.

Human beings who seem to accept that they are only worthy of such dwellings.

Surrounded by a community that seems increasingly ambivalent in the face of this preposterous condition.

A condition that is only growing worse, right here, in the world's wealthiest nation.

This crisis of houselessness is a consequence of the poor and middle-class being pitted against each other by those who are ridiculously wealthy – so that the uber rich may maintain their ridiculous wealth.

In a society that repeatedly fails to live up to its promise of equal opportunity, that repeatedly fails in fulfilling its dream of meeting the basic needs of every citizen, the question can rightly be asked:

“Will these bones live again?”

Ezekiel's question resonates not only in the big picture of our lives.

It resonates as well in our family relationships which are so often fractured and fraught.

As siblings struggle to understand each other.

As spouses grapple with family ruptures, a natural consequence of economic hardship and social alienation.

When it comes to the fabric of our society, our families and neighborhoods, the cry can be heard in living rooms and bedrooms:

“Will these bones live again?”

The answer to that pain-filled cry comes in a roundabout way in our gospel lesson today.

It's there, in the raising of Lazarus.

The most astounding miracle story in all of the gospels.

And on the surface, it seems quite obvious that the story of Lazarus answers the age-old question, "will these bones live again?" with a resounding "yes!", as Lazarus comes stumbling out of the grave.

But perhaps it's not quite as simple as that.

Perhaps what John's Gospel is asking us to sit with is something a bit less obvious, but far more important than even a dead man emerging from his grave.

That something has to do with a number that we heard in the gospel lesson today.

Did you hear it?

Unless you were listening carefully it's easy to let it slip by.

But the number that we heard, a number so central to understanding what is actually happening in today's readings, is the number 2.

As in, Jesus waiting 2 days after hearing of Lazarus' illness before heading out for Bethany.

Because the number 2 in Scripture is a symbol.

The number 2 symbolizes that which is complete.

That which is finished.

That which has reached its final place.

It was necessary for Jesus to wait 2 days in order for Lazarus' death to be complete.

His corpse rotting in the grave.

Complete.

Finished.

"Complete" does not always mean beautiful, lovely or hoped for.

"Complete" can also mean what appears to be very bad news indeed.

In this case, "complete" means the death of Jesus' best friend.

Because "completion" is necessary before something new can be born.

The prodigal son must find himself longing to eat the slop the pigs eat before he gets to that point of completion, which opens his eyes to where his true home is.

An alcoholic who is close to the place of being ready for recovery may not get to that place of recovery unless he completes his own downward spiral, and finds himself at his own utter bottom.

For it is only at that place of completion that the beginnings of a new life might begin to be formed.

So it is perhaps with our economic system.

We may need to get to a place of utter disparity in wealth before hearts and minds are opened to that which is more just and equitable.

Mr. Trump may need to find himself convicted on many charges and sentenced accordingly before he comes to grips with what it is to be a human being, and not a demagogue.

“Will these bones live?”

Next Sunday is Passion Sunday.

The irony of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead today is that in response, the powers-that-be shall condemn Jesus to death next week.

“No one is allowed to raise the dead!” insist the powers-that-be.

Because if someone can raise the dead, then the fear of death, the ultimate power wielded by the powers-that-be, is completely nullified.

It's made unimportant, and the powers-that-be become impotent.

So the powers-that-be will do all that they can to prevent such a thing from happening.

Jesus overcomes the powers-that-be by overcoming and defeating death — once — and for all of us.

But to do so, Jesus himself must endure completion.

That completion occurs with his slow, painful, bloody death on the cross.

Dead.

Buried in the tomb for 2 nights.

Complete.

And in his completion is our redemption.

I don't know where you are in your own spiritual journey.

But if you are struggling today with any manner of problem or perplexity, stay with it.

Keep walking until whatever you are facing is complete.

For it is only then that the miracle of change, of new life, of redemption, can occur.

"Will these bones live again?" the prophet wonders.

Blessed Julian of Norwich responds to the prophet with these words:

"There was not a single question or doubt I raised for which our good Lord did not have a reassuring response.

'I have the power to make all things well,' he said,

'I know how to make all things well, and I wish to make all things well.'

Then he said, 'I shall make all things well.

You will see for yourself: every kind of thing shall be well.'

By saying, 'I have the power,' he is referring to his authority as the Father.

'I know how' coincides with the wisdom of the Son.

Saying 'I wish' points to the volition of the Holy Spirit.

The entire blessed Trinity is unified when he says, 'I shall.'

And where he says, 'You will see for yourself,' I believe he is including **the whole of humanity.**" Julian of Norwich.

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall drag the whole world to myself" Jesus says. Jn. 12:32.

So it is that in Christ, we are all of us — complete.

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