

Waiting

Whenever I hear the story of Ezekiel's vision of that valley of bones I can't help but think of our indigenous people here in Hawaii.

When Captain Cook arrived, the scholars tell us there were nearly 700,000 people living in relative peace and prosperity in these islands.

When the last queen was deposed by those who followed in Captain Cook's wake, that population had shrunk to 40,000.

So we don't need to go back 2600 years when Ezekiel was dreaming dreams and seeing visions, to know something about dried up bones.

"Dried up bones" is a very long chapter in the story of Hawaii.

It wasn't just the devastation that occurred between 1778 and 1891.

After those years there were concerted efforts to attack and destroy the language, the dance, the heart of these islands, as the Hawaiian culture was beaten down, forbidden, then humiliated right out of town.

Many of you have tasted the bitter fruit of missionaries who came to do good, and ended up doing very well indeed.

And yet, not so long ago, perhaps just a generation or so, those bones began to rattle and shake; sinew and muscle suddenly started to grow, arteries and veins, then flesh ... and breath; the ha!

Dry old bones, no more.

And today, we hear our children speak the words of long ago; sing the songs, and dance.

What was once Hawaii has been raised up to live again.

Old bones no more!

It's happening in our lifetime.

Who says God cannot or will not put flesh on old dead bones?

And what of those old dead bones in your life, in mine?

The old dead bones that worship the Economy instead of God?

The old dead bones that are afraid of those who are different?

Can God put flesh on those old dead bones too?

There's a reading that fits perfectly between today's lesson about the valley of bones and the story of Lazarus raised from the dead.

It's from the prophet Habakkuk, and he's angry at God's delay, angry at the sometimes terrible patience faith requires.

But he's also hopeful; that no matter the delay, God's help will come.

And so he says:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry out to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?

Look at the nations, and see!"

Be astonished!

Be amazed!

I will stand at my watch post.

I will watch to see ... what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Then the Lord answered and said: 'write the vision.

Make it plain on tablets, so that the runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time.

If it seems delayed, wait for it.

It will surely come.

It will not be late."

The prophet's mixture of anger and hope is on full display in our gospel lesson, as Martha and Mary confront Jesus about his delay.

Lazarus is his best friend.

And yet Jesus waits for days while Lazarus descends into death.

He waits.

And then he waits some more.

Have you ever asked for something from God and heard only silence in reply?

Have you ever cried out for God's mercy — or justice — only to see darkness?

If you have, then you have a friend in Lazarus.

You have a friend in all those who watched the lifeblood of these islands drip into the sea for so many years.

You have a friend in all of those who give their lives seeking to create a better world, almost always with little that is tangible to show for their efforts.

Sometimes, God waits.

I don't know why.

It's a question best pondered with reverence and awe.

It's a question Jesus himself struggles with, as he waits, in the garden, before his arrest.

As he waits, enduring torture; enduring humiliation.

As he hangs to death on the tree, crying "Eli Eli lama sabathani!"

"My God, my God, why have you forgotten me?"

He waits.

We wait.

We are in the second week of a pandemic that began its assault on the world a few months ago.

Now it's here.

And while I don't for a minute believe that God sends disasters or plagues — disasters and plagues offer us a chance to wait, and to think, and perhaps to even change course.

Before this pandemic we all know that climate change presents an existential threat to humanity.

Climate change is brought about by the modern god "the Economy," before whom we all of us bow, to one degree or another.

Despite the warnings of massive ice melts at the poles and 500 year storms occurring annually, we continue down the same disastrous road.

Amazingly, this pandemic has done to the false god Economy what we've been unable to do: it has shut it down, if only for a while.

And in that shutting down, not only has blue sky returned to cities in China that hadn't seen it in years, but we, as a community, have been given the gift of rest, of renewed relationships, even if from a distance.

We've been given the gift of time to think, time to ask the truly important questions.

Questions that ask about our priorities, like, what matters in life?

Who matters in life?

Questions that challenge the status quo, like, why do 77 people own as much wealth as 3.5 billion people?

Why do corporate executives earn not 40x but 400x the average worker's pay?

Why is it that half our people cannot afford an unexpected \$400 expense?

These questions undermine a system that depends upon grotesque inequality and on unlimited and ever expanding consumption, no matter the cost to life, to environment, to relationships.

These are the questions the god named Economy can't bear to hear us ask.

Yet, these are the questions this period of waiting allows us to ponder.

Just as Lazarus is called forth from the grave, can we today call forth our own long forgotten creativity?

Can we call forth a return to the land, a return to recognizing nature not as a bottomless pit to be exploited, but as our living and breathing mother?

Can we remember that humanity has existed for a very long time, and our current rapacious system is a mere blip on the screen of our history?

If so, then this period of waiting just might be the blessing that enables us to change course, and in the changing, to at long last embrace life.

This period of waiting just might set old dry bones to rattling!

It just might call out of the grave a new and heretofore unimagined way of living; one that seeks harmony with nature, with one another, and with God!

As we near the end of our desert journey this Lenten Season, and as we continue that journey into this brave new world of pandemic, let's pray that the dry bones in our life may begin to rattle!

Let's pray that the story of our faith, born out of community, born out of trial and suffering, will take on a new, imagination-filled, creative, life!

And when it does, we too shall hear with joy the promise of our God:

"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live!"

+amen.