

Faith Meets Death

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 John 11: (1-31) 32-44

If you have been observing conversations about our current state of affairs amid the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have noticed how death and disease are being weighed against money and wealth.

Yes, if you didn't know, some people are very, very upset that businesses are closing, people aren't working, productivity has gone negative, the stock market has plummeted (when can we say "crashed"?), and many sectors of the economy have ground to a halt.

You may be upset, too, but you probably realize that such drastic measures are our best and only real defense against what will still likely be catastrophic losses. You probably also realize that if enough people get sick, businesses will close, people won't be working, productivity will go negative, the stock market will plummet, and the economy will grind to a halt ... and tens of thousands of people will die.

'But, but the economy, employment, productivity, the stock market, which all seemed so completely healthy and prosperous and abundant just a few weeks ago, should not be sacrificed, they say.

How extreme is this bizarre sensibility? On Tuesday, conservative broadcaster Glenn Beck stated: "I would rather die than kill the country. Because it's not the economy that's dying, it's the country." The editor of the conservative religious journal "First Things" wrote "sentimental humanists" are behind the closures, noting "Satan prefers sentimental humanists" to do his handiwork.

These folks admit that thousands, even tens of thousands may die, but that we should accept that and get back to work, back to normal. Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R) suggested on Fox News that grandparents, including himself, would gladly sacrifice their lives to preserve the financial well-being of their children and grandchildren. Fox News's Brit Hume defended Patrick's remarks, saying it was a "reasonable viewpoint." Laura Ingraham said that the people who die will be sick and old and were going to die anyway.

That religious publication editor also said, "The closures [of churches] were evidence of Satan preying on the fear of death.' He really has a thing for Satan. And get this, he added, "There are many things more precious than life." And "the Eucharist itself is now subordinated to the false god of 'saving lives.'"

Underlying all of these nutty, unethical, despicable, and ignorant sentiments - yes, wrong on so many levels it is hard to count them all - underlying them all is, on one hand, the willingness to end life (for others at least) and then deify money and prosperity over life on the other.

If there is one thing that has been true of human beings since the Garden of Eden, it's the allure of playing God. Those who want to play God are sadly too prevalent when matters of life and death occur.

The really funny thing about this God-playing is that God doesn't play with death. God puts death on notice, and puts humans on notice, that death's ability to extinguish life is foolishness. God aims to bring life, and has death extinguished on God's terms.

Life out of death is not invented by Jesus or the New Testament. Our selection from Ezekiel 37, the familiar valley of dry bones, is stark and dramatic.

It is a vision of Ezekiel's, and as a vision is metaphorical. Having been talking about the devastation and desolation of the house of Israel, and how God promises to turn things around, we know that the valley of dry bones represents God's people. They are hopeless, despairing, lifeless. God's people are portrayed as baked, dry bones, scattered and heaped in a valley of death. The imagery convincingly illustrates utter lifelessness. Nothing, *absolutely* nothing lives here.

The prophet is led by God back and forth across the valley floor to see the desiccated bones. The prelude yields to the key question posed to the prophet by God: *Son of man, can these bones live?*

The standard and natural answer would be, "No way!" The prophet shows the character of his faith when he makes the exceptionally reserved response, *O Sovereign Lord, you alone know*. He admits that matters of life and death are not his to determine, and yields the answer to the Author of life and death, steering clear of it himself. Wise move, and one that we would be wise to imitate.

God tells Ezekiel to **prophesy**, to address the bones, invoking the power of God. This is a spiritual authority that Ezekiel received when he was called by God. Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, and God goes to work. Bones come together. Skeletons are en fleshed. The forms of life appear, but they aren't animated yet. There are emergent human forms, but there is no life in them. They are mere bodies, still just corpses instead of living beings.

Ezekiel is commanded again to prophesy, this time to the **wind**, the breath, the spirit - same word; all three in Hebrew are *ruach*: wind, breath and spirit. *Ruach* enters these bodies and they stand on their feet, the whole people of God made whole again by God's will and the willing servant of God.

In the end, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to God's people now, to invoke the sacred power and authority of God and God's Spirit, and lead them to new life. With such prophesying, they're to be led into new life and out of the death that has trapped and enslaved them in Babylon. Here we see that God is all about *undoing* death.

Jesus has spent his ministry teaching about his authority, his way to hope and healing, and the unique gifts of God that bring life, freedom and power for the faithful through his ministry. But in today's Lazarus story in John 11, worldly standards and assumptions about death show their resilience and assert their power, as if Jesus was unknown to them, as if Jesus and God in him were powerless among them.

The attentive reader hears strange comments from Jesus. When told Lazarus is sick, Jesus sees how God's glory and the glory of his Son will be revealed. He denies death and affirms God's work. He doesn't rush to be with Lazarus, but waits, lingering a few days as if letting Lazarus die. And Lazarus does die, seeming to contradict what Jesus said. *Then* Jesus decides to go. Jesus states this is all happening **so you will believe**. Therefore, we know **unbelief** is at the heart of the story. Watch for **unbelief** in this story; it is everywhere.

The disciples are confused and believe **they** will die. Thomas says to his fellow disciples: *Let us also go, that we may die with him*. That's the spirit, Thomas. Let's all dig a hole and lay down in it; last one in is a rotten corpse. Thomas, and the many commentators we can hear today, are ready to surrender to death and let death do what it will because there is no power that withstand death. The thought that the power of faith brings life amid an uncertain future is markedly absent.

The grieving sisters Martha and Mary openly express their disappointment since Jesus has come too late to do any good. Martha says, *Lord, if you had been here ... But even now God will give you whatever you ask*. This sounds like she might be on track. Jesus says, *Your brother will rise again*. Martha replies, 'yeah, I know: he'll rise on the last day.' Jesus has to identify himself to her directly, *I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?* Martha's response amounts to, 'Oh yeah, sure,' [but Lazarus is still dead]. Martha says this without ever confessing that Jesus **is** the resurrection and the life.

Meanwhile sister Mary is surrounded by a flock of mourners who follow her wherever she goes, wailing and crying. Mary repeats Martha's words, *Lord, if you had been here....* As Mary weeps and the wailing party wails, Jesus' own spirit is moved and troubled, says the text. He asks where Lazarus has been laid. The whole group says, *Come and see, Lord*. And then Jesus wept. Interestingly, Jesus wept but he hasn't even gotten to the tomb yet.

Bystanders misread him. Weeping is seen as a sign of Jesus' love for Lazarus. Then they wonder, 'why can Jesus heal the blind man, but not keep Lazarus from dying?' Jesus may be asking himself, 'Why do they think I could stop his death before, but cannot overcome death now?'

Repeatedly, Jesus must overcome **resistance to the life** he offers and overcome the willing and weak **surrender to death** of those who supposedly heard and believed him, and had faith in God. Despite the good news of Jesus, they walk lamely in obedience to death's convincing power, and away from faith in their God. They

disregard the promise of life that Jesus presents, no matter how much they say he is Lord and Son of God. And for **that**, Jesus wept, not for Lazarus.

Sin and death appear like victors at this point, but Jesus is not done. Jesus demands the stone in front of the tomb be rolled away. Martha complains about the stench – he’s been in there four days, you know. He replies to Martha, *Did I not tell you that if you **believed**, you would see the glory of God?*

All of this echoes the hopeless deadliness of the valley of dry bones: the finality of a stone-closed tomb, the rotting, putrefying corpse. And yet here is the invitation to faithfulness in the power of God to bring impossible life out of irrefutable death.

As the stone is removed, Jesus prays **aloud** so disbelieving disciples can hear him. The text says he prays: ... *that they may **believe** that you sent me.* Prays or prophesies?

Like Ezekiel’s prophesying to the dry bones, Jesus then calls Lazarus forth. As Lazarus comes out, Jesus orders him released from the linen death clothes, the bindings in which he was tied up by unbelieving disciples. For when there is belief in Jesus, there is freedom **from** death, freedom **for** life.

As we come into the stories of Jesus’ last days of ministry, we’re warned on this last Sunday of Lent to be prepared and alert for the amazing work of God in Jesus. Today we’re given a prelude to the death by human violence that will come, but we’re also been shown the authority and power of life in Christ. We are challenged to believe, to have faith in God’s promise of life, nothing less.

These stories relate astounding miracles. But the wise reader will know the miracle here is **not** resurrection or restoration, dead men walking, or flesh and breath woven onto dry bones. The miracle is simply bearing genuine faith in God and his Son Jesus, and the promise of life that God offers each of the faithful. As we face anxious and painful times, may we meet it with faith in our God who meets the specter of death with the promise of life.