

Prophesy Life

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 John 11: (1-31) 32-45

Florida State Attorney Aramis Ayala in Orange County has caused quite a stir. You've probably heard about her. She is the newly elected State Attorney who announced that she would not be seeking the death penalty in any cases coming through her office.

This was a pretty stunning announcement for several reasons. For one, in a very close race, she never once mentioned her opposition to the death penalty. It seems rather odd, and even dishonest, to have such a conviction and never state it to voters. Stealth candidates often have a very short political career. I remember years ago when Christian conservatives ran stealth candidates for things like School Board seats, never admitting their personal faith agenda that they sought to advance once in office. It seemed wrong then, and it seems just as wrong for Ayala to do it.

Secondly, this is Florida and the good Christian folks of Florida like their state to seek and exercise the death penalty. This is a major advance from less than a hundred years ago when people would simply exercise the death penalty with a rope and a tree.

Further, somehow Christian protagonists never square the incongruity of seeking the death penalty when their Lord and Savior endured execution by the state.

Despite getting all wrapped up in annoying legal stuff, we in Florida have sought to make it pretty easy to put the death penalty to use. Only year or so ago, a simple majority of a sentencing jury could impose the death penalty, or a judge could impose the death penalty in sentencing, even over-ruling some bleeding heart jury that failed to do so. The Florida Supreme Court didn't like that approach of a simple jury majority for the ultimate penalty, so the 2016 legislature changed the law to require a 10-2 majority. However, last October, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that that was also unconstitutional – the US Supreme Court had set new precedent on that subject. Within days of the opening of the 2017 Florida Legislative Session last month, the Senate passed a unanimous verdict death penalty, declaring it their top priority because so much time was wasting when people could be getting executed.

With Florida's priority of death penalty finally once again re-established, to have a State Attorney say she wouldn't seek it must have seemed deviant, illegal, and incompetent. It seems Gov. Scott thought so when he removed her from the case of a cop killer that was going to trial. Whether he can actually do that is very much in doubt, although one judge hearing the case on the Governor's removal of Ayala sided with the Governor. This will be winding its way through the courts for a while.

It is the responsibility of the State Attorney in every case to determine what charges will be pursued and what penalties will be sought. If the Governor or anyone else doesn't like it, the general rule of thumb is that their opinion is irrelevant. The State Attorney was elected by the people, and the State Attorney has the responsibility to

uphold the Constitution and serve the people in the best manner possible. The thought that a State Attorney – in Florida! – would as a matter of policy NOT seek the death penalty whenever they could must somehow be against the law. Of course, it isn't.

Okay, I'll back off Florida because if you do a tiny amount of research, you'll find that every state that has the death penalty seems obsessed with using it. There are states that are breaking laws – that's right, breaking laws! – secretly trying to get certain drugs used in executions that are very scarce. Because it's *that* important to them that they get to use their death penalty.

It isn't that the death penalty makes any sense. The two things that its advocates dearly and deeply believe are 1) that it deters crime, and study after study has proved it doesn't, and 2) that it saves taxpayer money from taking care of an inmate for the rest of their life, and it doesn't. It actually costs more because of the appeals process, a whole lot more. That the death penalty fails at these two basic criteria has not dampened the ardor of its proponents one bit.

One more thing that should be troubling is the number of folks who have received the death penalty who were ultimately proven to be innocent, that we have a disturbingly high rate of wrongful executions, executing the wrong person for a crime they didn't commit.

I'd speculate that the real reason the death penalty is so endearing to its true believers is that it grants control over life and death, that human beings get to play God. If there is one thing that has been true of human beings since the Garden of Eden, it's the allure of playing God.

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.

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.

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: *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.

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 enfolded. The forms of life appear, but they aren't animated yet.

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.

In the end, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to God's people, 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. 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.

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's 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.

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 identifies himself to her, *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 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 **surrender to death** of those whom supposedly heard and believed him, and had faith in God. Despite the good news of Jesus, they walk in obedience to death's convincing power. 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. 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 the invitation to faithfulness in the power of God to bring impossible life out of irrefutable death.

As the stone is removed, then he 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, 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 genuine belief in God and his Son Jesus and the promise of life that God offers each of the faithful.