

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Sermon 4.2.17

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 11:17, 32-44

These two stories are both about a restoration to life—surprising, miraculous, somewhat monstrous, a total turnaround. Ezekiel witnesses a restoration of a whole people, the whole house of Israel. John bears witness to a restoration of one particular person, Jesus' friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha. Ezekiel's witness is of what is prophesied and promised to happen. John's witness is to an event in the life of Jesus that *did* happen. Both are fitting in the weeks leading up to Easter. To prepare us for the individual promise, and the collective promise, that death is not the final end, but that life restored or resurrected or perfected or made anew is the final end, indeed that ours will be a living end: these stories are both fitting for this fifth Sunday of Lent, two weeks prior to Easter.

As for Ezekiel, the third of the three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), he was the most apocalyptic of the three—the one who could see in historical events the sort of apocalypse (which is to say, the sort of revelation or unveiling or stripping bare) that lays plain the raw drives of existence. The social constructions of law and society, of civility and convention, of religious practice and wisdom teaching, are all felt to have been stripped away so that what is revealed is bare questions of war and conflict or peace and forgiveness, of cynical nihilism or truth and love, of death or life.

That's not just the works of an active imagination; it is *that*—an active imagination, but met with turns of history that *did* amount to such a stripping away of all civilization. Ezekiel was a Temple priest who lived at the time of Babylon's sacking Jerusalem and destroying the Temple. In fact, Ezekiel was one in the first wave of Israelites to be taken as captives back to Babylon, which speaks to his status in society. The Babylonians took the best people first.

Now in Babylon, Ezekiel heard of the destruction visited on his once home and his writings reveal his coming to terms with it all. In a series of three visions, God comes as a divine warrior to commission Ezekiel to prophesy to the people Israel, Ezekiel then delivers on behalf of God a judgment on Jerusalem and Judah, and then he foretells the building of a new city.

This envisioned trip to the valley the dry bones is a piece with that foretelling. It is one of the earliest promises of resurrection in the Bible and one of the most physical, visceral. The

sound of the bones, rattling; the sight of this valley, a mass grave that is at once gruesome and fanciful; the odd juxtaposition of horror and delight, extremes that you can only *really* know as embodied, extremities as they are: this is no mere abstract or spiritual vision. This isn't about the immortality of the soul. This is about the body, the earth and its people, about physical reality where death is a persistent fact, a fearsome fact, but is not (apparently) the final fact.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus according to John should be received as equally delightful and horrifying. The stench of the now four-days-dead Lazarus will be revolting, so this encounter between the living and the dead will be not only spiritually sullyng but also physically nauseating. The crying and mourning, the suspicion that Jesus could have and should have prevented this from happening, the necessity of that heavy stone and the challenge of rolling it away (something that will happen again, two weeks from now), and most of all the stumbling out of a body yet bound, no longer dead, not quite alive, both a miraculous gift and a terrifying reversal of the way things go: this story is one we mistake if we distance ourselves from it too much, if we see it only in its Sunday school rendering, cartoon colors and happy faces — though there is that...

But the restoration to life that is the focus of each of these stories isn't the only thing these two have in common. There's also this: both take place in graves, in tombs. Both stories have us spending time where death weighs heavy, one in mass graves, the other in a stinking tomb — waiting for the Lord, waiting for life.

I've been thinking a lot lately that if we, as Americans, were more acquainted with our grief we might be a more successful society. I've been thinking that so much harm is done in life when pain and suffering, when loss and grief are actively avoided, actively denied. That seems strange, doesn't it? It seems paradoxical — that to avoid something like suffering might be to compound suffering, that to deny something like loss or grief might be to compound the abiding sense of loss. On that radio show I recorded in January and I then sent out to many of you last week, the host Peter Wallace asked me, "What do you hope people will have learned during Lent this year?" My answer was that we all learn to grieve.

Because the fact is that suffering will find us life, that life will cause us pain. That's part of the deal. That's part of being alive, of being embodied. No one gets through this life without ever having suffered pain, without every having struggled with loss. And Lent, it

seems to me — this discreet period of time, these six weeks — offer as an opportunity to recognize this and to meditate on this, to practice grief.

Relatedly, I've been feeling lately that we have much to grieve. lament. Though things in my immediate life are pretty good, really quite pleasant, and though things in the lives of many people I know are pretty good, really quite pleasant (Hannah and Adam have a new baby, Donna and Wayne are off visiting family in Halifax, Maya has made a decision about college, Jenny has been happy with her new diet, Bonsai just published her second book), so much of our public life — as a country, indeed as a whole world — is beset with trends that are compounding grief upon grief.

As I read everything from tweets to long “think pieces” to historical tomes in trying to understand to how we got here — a unified theory of the Trump administration, one writer I've checked in with from time to time is Andrew O'Hehir, at *Salon* on-line magazine. On occasion, he takes a psychological tack to what's happening in American culture, and as concerns white Americans in particular. It's the sort of thinking that would arouse me to skepticism — except that it often rings true.

In one entry from last May entitled, “Appetite for destruction: White America's death wish is the source of Trump's hidden support,” he wrote, “I have argued on multiple occasions that white Americans, considered in the aggregate, exhibit signs of an unconscious or semi-conscious death wish. I mean that both in the Freudian sense of a longing for release that is both erotic and self-destructive — the intermingling of Eros [the sex drive] and Thanatos [the death drive] — and in a more straightforward sense.

“Consider the prevalence of guns in American society (and at a time when most gun-deaths are suicides). Consider also the epidemic rates of suicide and obesity (which might be called slow-motion suicide) among low-income whites, the widespread willingness to ignore or deny climate science, and the deeply rooted tendency of the white working class to vote against its own interests and empower those who have impoverished it. What other term can encompass all that?”

And he concluded, “Trump is the living embodiment of that contradictory desire for redemption and destruction.”

In another post, this from a year and a half ago, entitled, “Why the Donald's dark allure goes deeper than racism and xenophobia,” he wrote, “What Trump understands, and

may genuinely identify with, is the sense of embattled tribal identity found among too many white Americans of the 21st century..." It's a belief like the one Frederick Nietzsche presciently described, writing in 1881, that such people feel themselves as "living in a state of war as a small community, the existence of which is continually threatened, and the morality of which is the strictest possible.' What is the highest form of enjoyment to be found in such a community," Mr. O'Hehir asked of his readers, though again in Nietzsche's words, "for souls which are vigorous, vindictive, malicious, full of suspicion, ready to face the direst events, hardened by privation and morality?' It is 'the enjoyment of cruelty...Such a community would find its delight in performing cruel deeds, casting aside, for once, the gloom of constant anxiety and precaution.'

"That pretty much covers it, right?" Mr. O'Hehir asked. "Nietzsche was actually writing about primitive human society before it had been afflicted or transformed by Christian morality. But he would be amused and not altogether surprised to learn that we have come out the other side of that process, and that the nation that pronounces itself the world's arbiter of democracy and human rights has fallen to its knees before a third-rate imitation of King Ludwig II of Bavaria who promises to bring us back to the old gods and the old truths."

It's in returning to these old gods and old truths that Trump implies America will be made great again. I'd argue, though (as I doubt even needs to be said), that this isn't the sort of greatness we should be going for—for it being too costly, too brutal, too heatless and cruel.

Philosopher Costica Bradatan argued something similar in a column in last week's *New York Times*, if in less grandiose terms. Under the headline, "Our Delight in Destruction," and using Dostoevsky's main character from *Notes from Underground* as a springboard, he took issue with the assumption that human beings are ultimately reasonable creatures, such that the human story will be one of increasing reasonableness.

I don't happen to share this assumption—that human beings are primarily and ultimately reasonable—so the first three quarters of the column I couldn't quite get with. But I do agree with where he ended up—sort of. "The human is a knot of contradictions," he wrote, "and opposing drives: reason and unreason; wisdom and recklessness; faithlessness and mysticism; logic and imagination. We feed on exact science as much as we do on myths, on fictions and fabulations. We can die for others or let them perish in the cold; we can create

extraordinary things only to enjoy their utter destruction; human society can be a paradise and hell at one and the same time.”

He continued, “In the past century, philosophy has mostly abandoned the effort to account for this complexity... We’ve become masters of conformity, empirical evidence and science... [Indeed,] it is considered unrigorous and unprofitable to talk of matters of the human heart—that obscure little thing that, more than logic or arguments, make people act and live and die...

“The main reason we don’t engage with the abyss, however,” he claimed, “...is sheer fear.”

But (and this is me now speaking) the fear of engaging with this haunting presence—a presence in absence—is nothing compared to what fearsome thing it is when the abyss comes for us and we are unfit for the encounter. Mr. Bradatan noted, “When the hyper-rationalist model fails, it fails spectacularly. In the American election, reason gave way to fear, resentment, hate, and spite... What seemed to drive support for Trump was darker and far more complicated [than human reason— what drove it was] the heart. And what [compounds the consequences of this drive and the election it determined is] the fact that we find ourselves for poorly equipped to comprehend it.”

By way of conclusion, Mr. Bradatan made this casual comment, “Dealing with the human abyss used to be the province of religion, but ever since God died we haven’t really been able to find a good replacement.” He made a short list for what we might try as a replacement—the humanities, for one. But he was just as quick to cast these aside as inadequate. And he came at last to this: “Unless we will find a way to account for the *whole* human subject, without self-flattery and self-delusion, we will move in circles, unable to overcome the blinding hyper-rationalism under which we currently slave.”

You know what? I looked up Mr. Bradatan. He lives in Lubbock, Texas—too far for him to come to join us for worship. Otherwise, I’d have invited him. His quickness to declare serious religion dead, his quickness to assume that the “God is dead” movement was right absolutely (as if the God we know in Christ might not, though having died, also yet live)—I’d have enjoyed the opportunity to call that quickness into question.

Don’t get me wrong, I think his assumption is based on real experience. Much of the church *is* just goofing off, marking time—the Evangelical wing caught in their small-

mindedness and the mainline wing caught in our faithless making do. Many iterations of congregational life seem as intent as any other gathering on foreclosing on the shadow-side of life, the murky depths of the human heart, the existential abyss and Thanatos, the death drive that compels us toward it. And, to be honest, there have been times when I'd like to join in on this happy-clappy project. But, to no avail. I just don't know how you can do that when what gathers you in to be together is a common and confessed belief in a crucified Lord.

So, what if Americans of each and all sorts were able to mourn the passing of so much that once felt inherently American? Industry and manufacturing, a thriving (white) middle class, home-ownership and living wages for most sorts of work, one-income families and clear lines of authority within those families, a presumption that every problem has a solution and America could take the lead in fixing everything one for all, with hardly ever an encounter with shadows and darkness, to say nothing of a sustained recognition of the persistence of shadows and darkness, of sin and evil—what if we could all take a beat, could take a moment, could take a year and recognize that this passing is real and really felt.

One of the risks in taking on this project of collective is the recognition that for many, perhaps for most, the loss of all this is actually a case of “good riddance.” After all, so many people and ways of being human were closed out of the common weal and common life in that post-war-America construction. If you weren't white and you weren't healthy, if you weren't hetero-normative and weren't raised in household bound by marriage, then you really weren't in the picture.

The other day, Tobias asked me what was the challenge in raising kids when I was a kid. If the constant pressure of the Internet and social media, and the predatory reality of addiction—to opioids, to pornography, to things that kill relationship—weren't in my parents' set of concerns for raising me, what was?

It took me a minute. I had a pretty self-contained, safe upbringing. “It was a lot harder to be an oddball,” I finally said. “Life was hard for the people who weren't 'of the norm.’”

How so, he wondered. He could hardly imagine such a thing. Everyone he knows is an oddball of some sort. “I knew one black person before I went to Exeter. One. She was adopted into a white family.” Tobes was shocked at this. “I knew one person whose parents were divorced. One.” He couldn't believe that either. I didn't know anybody until third grade whose primary language wasn't English—and then it was a family of Laotian refugees. I

didn't know anybody who spoke Spanish. The three women whom I suspected (rightly it turns out) to be lesbians I only figured out because I was paying attention and I connected some dots. And when my dad lost his job following a labor strike, that was more of a harbinger than I realized at the time—than any of us did. Luckily, my mom, unlike many women she knew, had already 'gone back to work.'

Yes, of course, the passing away of this social hegemony comes as liberation to many—and well deserved, *long* overdue. But it also comes as a deathblow to others.

Can we grieve with them?

Can we grieve together?

I don't ask this question lightly. My book club had agreed to read *Strangers in Their Own Land* last month, an empathic consideration of the disaffected of the rural south, what turned out to be a small subset of "Trump country." And I didn't read it. I told my club, "I'm not in a listening place right now."

But, if we were to—if we were to grieve together—I wonder if then the death-drive, this which I *do* think has its grip around our collective life, would lessen in power, would weaken in force and ferocity. If we were to grieve together, I wonder if then the cruelty and the brutality (which we've been flirting with for years in our pop-culture output), the punitive spirit that has filled our public life would ease off, would lighten up. If we were in some deep and profound way to mourn the passing of the modern era, and the nation-state, and the extraction-economy, and the old world order; if also we were to grieve the passing of the seductive illusion that we who hold of power are good and right and flawless, that there is no shadow-side to what we do, no sin entwined in our living or evil built into our social constructions—if, if, then maybe together we might be able to look forward in hope.

That's a big project, I realize—and not one whose conclusion will show itself any time soon, if ever in my lifetime.

But maybe that's where we are, maybe that's what we're involved in, and maybe that's what we can participate in with the length of our lives—this standing amidst what amounts to tombs, mass graves, the "wrecks of time;" standing and withstanding in profound Christian hope.

The Church as we know it is, after all, a product of the modern secular West. But the Church universal far predates, and so will of course post-date, the modern secular West.

We are in the world, but we are not of the world.

Did you notice how Martha phrased her belief in Jesus as the Messiah? She said, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

It’s funny that she should say this, right? Funny that she would say to the one standing right there, right beside her, that he was *coming into the world*. I mean, wouldn’t it seem that he was already here?

But what Martha seems to know about the Messiah is that he is the Messiah in his coming—not in his already being here and contained within the constraints of the world as we know it, but in his coming. He is ever coming.

There’s hope in this—because the waiting we do for this coming Messiah isn’t done in the question of *whether* he will come, but *when*. He is coming; we don’t need to doubt that. We need only to watch for it and prepare for it, to lean into it that our anticipation might be realization, and to receive him when he arrives, an arrival that is though yet in the coming.

The death that is all around: this is real and it’s powerful, dreadful; and we do ourselves no favors if we deny it or work to avoid it. What we are to do is to wait in its midst, to resist the evil assumption that life in the world is a zero-sum game so that if some win than others will lose, to resist indeed the drive toward death that is persistent and compelling, and to anticipate resurrection and new life.

Mr. Bradaton, and perhaps many others, presumes no one’s doing this anymore. But we are, this Sunday and to some degree every Sunday. We’re here and we’re doing it—and that’s not nothing.

Thanks be to God.