

Dry Bones, Lazarus and New Life in the Wilderness

Ezekiel 37:1-10, 14 John 11:1-6, 17-19, 30-45

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Is there a word for us this day, as we live through these days?

Is there a word when it seems that hope is at a low ebb, when grace has been taken off all the shelves and hoarded, when love is something folks seem to offer only to family, when the future seems bleak and uncertain?

Is there a word for us – this day? The prophet says there is, and that word is *life*.

Who hasn't wondered if we will ever be able to get back to normal, whatever that is? Who isn't wondering whether the economy, our jobs, our families, our schools are going to be able to go back to the way they were? Or a new normal? Who hasn't wondered whether those bones of loss, of worry, of hopelessness, will ever come back to life?

Our fears rattle around in the attics of our minds, and we wonder can they be knitted together? Can the sinews of hope wrap around us and give us strength? Can the Spirit - that Spirit of grace and hope and newness, come and breathe life, new life, into us? Or have we been completely cut off? Have we become a people who have lost all hope, who have fallen away in this exile of isolation.

The prophet who saw those bleached bones of his ancestors who died on that forced march into exile, says our God is going to bring us new life; our God is going to bring us new hope; our God is going to bring us new grace; our God is going to help us create community when it seems that we are separated from one another endlessly. But maybe we are not there yet. We only see dry bones.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, there is so much of the human experience of loss: receiving word of a loved one's illness and need; decision-making, timing, and complications, even risks and dangers to be considered; frustrations, questioning, and lack of understanding on the part of those closest to us; grief and mourning by loved ones, and the community encircling them, audacious hope, the profession of faith and a wistful "what might have been"; trying to find the right words; the potential of what we are saying; courage, anger, and weeping;

We worship a God whose power is created the galaxies and who is as close as our own breath and tears. Powerful words in this text. "Jesus began to weep." Why do you think he wept? These words strongly suggest that he knew anger, and grief, and deep spiritual pain, just as we do. He was moved to compassion and sadness even as he knew that all this had happened for

the glory of God. Can we imagine the tears of Jesus, and do they transform our understanding of who he is? What is Jesus weeping about today?

Coronavirus has brought great fear and suffering to our world. The number of people who have died continues to rise. Weeping we have been separated from people we love. Weeping for special occasions and celebrations cancelled.

Lazarus is dead and in a tomb, a cave. Perhaps grief, loss, anxiety, financial worry has put us in our own tomb of despair. Jesus stood outside that tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!" We will come out – out of homes and to a new normal but we are waiting. Maybe we need to see ways we can come out now into some hope and new life.

A couple of years ago, I listened to a wonderful On Being podcast in which Krista Tippett interviewed Benedictine Monk David Steindl-Rast, who talks about the power of gratitude to reconnect us to God and each other, to ground us again in what is real.

But what stuck out to me most in this interview is how he answered her when she asked him about his perspective of living in a time where things seem so precarious and terrible.

She couldn't have known what was coming in 2020. Nevertheless, his words made such an impact on me then, that I kept stopping and rewinding the podcast to hear them again, (while my kids groaned behind me in the car and told me to quit it).

This is what he said:

We must acknowledge our anxiety...

We must acknowledge our anxiety, but we must not fear.

There is a great difference.

...Anxiety, or being anxious, this word comes from a root that means "narrowness," and choking, and the original anxiety is our birth anxiety.

We all come into this world through this very uncomfortable process of being born.... It's really a life-and-death struggle for both the mother and the child.

And that is the original, the prototype, of anxiety.

At that time, we do it fearlessly, because fear is the resistance against this anxiety. See? If you go with it, it brings you into birth. If you resist it, you die in the womb. Or your mother dies.

So, anxiety is a reasonable response to a lot of human experience.

and we are to acknowledge it and affirm it,

because to deny our anxiety is another form of resistance.

But the fear is life destroying.

Anxiety is not optional in life, he says. It's part of life.

But we can look back at our lives, at times we were in really tight spots, times of anxiety, and say to ourselves, we made it! We got through it! ... In fact, the worst anxieties and the worst tight spots in our life, often, years later, when you look back at them, reveal themselves as the beginning of something completely new, a completely new life.

And that can teach us, and that can give us courage, also, now, that we think about it, in looking forward and saying, yes, this is a tight spot. ...But, if we go with it,...it will be a new birth. And that is trust in life.

*On Being with Krista Tippett podcast
1/21/2016
Brother David Steindl-Rast
The Anatomy of Gratitude*

I have been thinking about his words today. If and when we do venture out, we can feel anxious. The grocery store can be an anxious place. When I went to Safeway I was aware of the current reality. But in the midst of the anxiety, and the care we took not to get too close to one another, we still saw each other, maybe more so. We smiled, we nodded hello, we were careful to leave enough for others. When I thanked my check-out person, I choked up. I am really thankful for her.

This is an anxious time. Yes, this is a tight spot. We are being squeezed. What new life will come from this, we've yet to even speculate. But the way the Spirit works is to bring us through death to life, through fear to hope, through anxiety to newness enough for today.

We hear the words of Jesus, "Unbind him, and let him go."

How many of us have known the feel of those strips of cloth, the grave's apparel, feeling dead inside. Maybe we feel like there is a shroud that wraps us up in a leaden existence this side of physical death What are the "strips of cloth" that bind us?

Maybe we feel like we should be doing more even in our sheltering in place. What binds us now in this wilderness time of the pandemic of Covid 19 and sheltering in place?

Kay Collette is reading a beautiful poem as part of our worship experience. I appreciated her experience this week of finding this poem.

What strikes me in the Lazarus story is the conclusion "UNBIND HIM." That's what happened to me through the gift of this poem. How are we bound/dead inside? By a whole host of inherited should, perceptions, habits, etc. That morning for me it was "You should be creative, inspiring, etc. for people in this difficult time." But the sense of lack, the fear of emptiness

bound me like Lazarus. The Beloved spoke through the poet's words--Let go of that self-image and realize you really can do nothing (via Ego, shoulds.) Freed of the anxiety, I began to feel human again, quite OK to be uninspired and uninspiring. Whew. Alive again. Breathing freely. Appreciating the poet's ability to be fully aware in the present moment with the ant. (That's not been my modus operandi!) The real gem in the experience was feeling known and loved by the Mystery we call God. I think the Christ Spirit resurrects us from our deaths all the time.

The other striking thing about UNBIND HIM is that Jesus didn't do it--the community did it.

Let's remember that. Together we encourage, pray for, listen, weep, help unbind each other. Part of being the church. Spirit using us in ways that bring a sense of being alive, of being, not doing. Grateful to the Holy that we are not alone. Deeply connected even in this time the pandemic, of worry, fear and anxiety as we shelter in place.

I have hope that the Holy One unbinds us, breathes life into us, and helps these dry bones dance. Amen.

I am grateful for the Daily Devotions of Rev. Kara Root who helped inspire parts of this sermon.
<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/>