

“Resetting During Exile: Making Dry Bones Live”
Lent 5A (March 29, 2020) - COVID-19 (SUNDAY 3)

Scriptures:

Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

In a strange paradox, the last two and a half weeks have been some of the busiest for those of us who work for Jesus Inc. Paradoxical because most clergy are now working from home, and you'd think the pace would've slowed. I've heard something similar from many of you who now work from home - you IT people, professors, administrators, teachers: you're home, but the workload seems to have *increased*. How many Zoom meetings have you been on this week? For over 3 million of our fellow Americans now out of work, the experience is entirely different, as it is for graduate students, whose research has been put on hold just as they were trying to finish their dissertations. Life has changed for all of us, and for some, it's been completely upended.

Since I'm now home more, I've started to notice the things of everyday life that I'd missed before. Maybe this is true for you as well. For example, have you ever watched a cat clean itself? I mean *really* watched how meticulously they lick their legs and twist themselves in ways humans never could to clean their backs and stomachs. It's like a private spa session followed by a five hour nap. As we're all *metaphorically* watching the paint dry during our time of sequester, it's been interesting to pay attention to the rhythms of daily life. Is your fridge as loud as mine? It rumbles to life, reaches the right temperature, and then silence. Likewise the furnace. It fires to life, warms the house, and then silence. I haven't yet gotten to the point where I'm counting how many times these two appliances do their thing, but maybe that'll happen next week. One person made me chuckle when he wrote on Twitter: “[I've been home for two weeks,] I finished Netflix.” Another made laugh out loud when she wrote on Twitter, “The truth is, it's not so boring being stuck at home. But it's interesting that one bag of rice has 8,453 grains, while another has 8,462.”

Late night television hosts like Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon have also been working from home: Colbert hosting his show from a bathtub and near a fire pit and on his porch, and Jimmy Fallon hosting from a couch at home with his wife filming on her phone as his kids crawl all over him - a visual reminder of just how hard it is to work from home when the whole family is in close quarters.

Sue and I have been reaching out to all of our members and friends this week, starting with A in the church directory and going all the way to Z - just trying to get a feel for how things are going for you. Some of this reaching out has been through my daily Community Chats on Zoom, some through email, or text, or by the old fashioned phone call. What we're hearing from you is that all of your lives have been upended in some way. Some of you have extended family with the virus and you're scared for them. Some of you have family and friends in quarantine. Some of you have jobs or whole businesses that are on the line. Some of you have shared stories about heroic healthcare workers you know who are risking their lives. For some of you, your adult children are moving back home, in some cases to escape New York City, and now you're sharing space in ways you haven't done in years. Many of you are using technology to keep in contact. You've told me about Zoom game nights or

Zoom watercolor painting sessions or Zoom cocktail hours or “wine time” with family and friends. A few of you told me about how you’re paying more attention to the birds that gather around your bird feeders, and to the acrobatic squirrels trying to get a share of the food. Some of you are enjoying the solitude - taking walks, focusing on your breathing, doing yoga, reading interesting books, watching interesting shows and films, playing games - my family has been tackling jigsaw puzzles after dinner. And almost all of you have expressed to me in one way or another some concern and anxiety. This new normal is *not* what we typically think of when we think of “normal life.” We’re all experiencing a rupture.

Some of my Jewish friends have urged us to view this moment as an extended Sabbath - a rest, an opportunity to reset, a break from the unhealthiest aspects of our “normal” lives. In his book *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen writes about just how busy our “normal” lives have become.¹ “Just look for a moment at our daily routine,” writes Nouwen. “In general we are very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, [and obligations to fulfill]. Our calendars are filled with engagements, and our years are filled with plans and projects [and work]. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do,” he says, “and we [can] move through life in such a distracted way that we [may] not even take the time ... to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are *worth* thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many ‘musts’ and ‘oughts’ that have been handed on to us [W]e are busy people,” writes Nouwen, “[and] just like all other busy people, [we are] rewarded with the rewards which are rewarded to busy people! [Maybe] we feel compelled to be this way,” he continues. “[We seem to say to ourselves,] If being busy is a good thing, then I must be busy. If having money is a sign of real freedom, then I must claim my money. If knowing many people proves my importance, I will have to make the necessary contacts. [Maybe, he says, we have a] lurking fear of failing and the steady urge to prevent this by gathering more of the same - more work, more money, more friends.”

Yes, perhaps this moment of rupture - this moment of sequester, of “exile” as the Hebrew prophets call it - perhaps this moment in our collective lives can be an opportunity - an opportunity to pause, to Sabbath, to pay attention to the cats, and to the rhythms of the house, to family time and solitude and breathing and prayer and knitting and reading books and to the beauty of the natural world. Perhaps we can see this moment as an opportunity for living a new kind of life. Contemplative thinker Richard Rohr refers to moments like these in our lives as the “divine ambush.”² Times, he writes, when we are completely caught off guard, when we realize we are not “fully in control”; times, he says, when we can “rewire the old system.” Times when the God of the cross becomes the God of resurrection, of new life - to borrow imagery from our ancient tradition.

I think both of today’s lectionary readings speak to this. Both readings raise the kinds of questions that many of us are asking right now - questions about life and meaning, about what it means to live fully during times of trial, about how to hunt for hope in the direst of circumstances. Today’s Old Testament reading is one of the most vivid and imaginative stories in the entire Bible about the prophet Ezekiel’s tour of a valley of dry bones. It’s an artistic story painted colorfully with words by the ancient prophet. The first color Ezekiel applies to the canvas is white. Ezekiel says he was spirited by God out to a valley filled with piles of dry bones. The bones were “very dry,” he writes. It’s a white image - an image of

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 12-13.

² Richard Rohr, *Just This: Prompts and Practices for Contemplation* (London: SPCK, 2017), 28.

dessication, of bones bleached white by the sun. The color white on Ezekiel's canvas is a color of hopelessness, of death and decay and exile. The prophet was writing to a people in exile in the 6th century BCE, a people in sequester, far away from "normal" life - a people asking questions like: Is there a future? Will life return to normal? *Can* life return to normal? When will this time of exile end? Is there hope? The prophet begins by painting in white, which reminds me of songs on the Beatles' *White* album, in particular the song "I'm So Tired," which speaks of a deep longing for respite. Or, the *White* album song "Yer Blues," a song about death, which begins with the words, "I'm lonely" - a song that, when I listen to it, makes me crave hope and a light at the end of the tunnel.

Today's gospel reading from John also probes the depths of human emotion in the face of death. The gospel writer carefully paints the scene, adding key characters along the way - characters like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, a group of grieving friends and, of course, Jesus himself. The setting is a scene of death. Lazarus - the friend of Jesus, one whom Jesus loved, as John says - has died. For dramatic effect, the gospel writer says that Jesus waited "two days" before arriving on the scene. Tension builds in the story, and Jesus weathers criticisms from Mary and Martha - Lazarus' sisters - who criticize him for delaying. "Had you been here," they say, "our brother would not have died." And when Jesus finally arrives, when he sees and feels the grief of Mary and Martha, and when he sees the weeping of Lazarus' friends, Jesus himself expresses emotion, more emotion here than in any other story about him in the gospels. First, Jesus expresses rage, translated in our English bibles as "he was greatly disturbed," literally, he "snorted like a horse." The Greek word conveys deep emotion - emotion of rage and anger and indignation that death can cause such grief. Then John says that Jesus was "deeply moved," a Greek word that means "stirred up," "agitated," "unsettled," "troubled." The emotion of Jesus in this story is vivid and deep, and so very human - how many of us are feeling rage right now; how many of us are stirred up or deeply troubled? And then the gospel writer says that Jesus wept. It's the only time in the gospels when Jesus weeps - feeling a deep sadness, a heartfelt grief that people like Lazarus, in the prime of life, can have their lives cut short by something beyond their control.

Ezekiel paints a white scene of dry bones. John paints a shadowy scene of grief and rage and sadness. But both stories shift dramatically and begin to paint with the bright colors of hope. John's Jesus orders the stone covering Lazarus' tomb to be removed, and then he shouts - the Greek word used in the story implies shouting - he shouts, ordering Lazarus to come out. And out he comes, filled with new life. And Ezekiel paints a scene of new life with vivid, life-giving colors. God orders him to prophesy to the bones and to prophesy to the wind and to the breath - wind, breath, and spirit are different ways to translate the same word in Hebrew in this story - he speaks to the wind, to the breath - he channels God's spirit - and in it blows, like a hurricane, resurrecting the bones, covering them with muscles and flesh, filling lungs with pulsating life and hope. It's an artistic vision of hope for people living in exile. I love how 19th century artist Paul Gustave Dore depicts this dry bones scene with Ezekiel standing in the distance watching as the bones, one-by-one, come to life in stages, the ones closest to him fully human, the ones more distant merely rumbling toward new life. A scene of light shining in the darkest valley. Both of today's scripture readings are stories - are paintings - of hope for all of us who've had our lives upended over the past few weeks. Stories, paintings in vivid colors, about a God who flows through us, who *breathes* through us - a God who can turn crosses into resurrections and bring new life out of the direst of circumstances.

This past week UCC Associate Conference Minister Shernell Edney Stilley wrote about hope in the midst of such uncertain times. “[Over the past few weeks, she writes,] I find myself (at best) treading water while (at worst) feeling like I’m being swept under the tide. I often have to turn off the television, computer, and phone just so that I can avoid being inundated with more things that I can’t fix. [But],” she says, “as a person of faith, I have tuned in more to what is ... going on around me other than just ‘the spread [of the virus]’. Despite the morbidity of the news ... , I have seen on just a local level how life always finds a way to overcome death. I have seen businesses that were forced to close operation turn around and form community food ... centers. I have seen school district administrators fight to keep school [lunch programs] open [to sustain the most vulnerable children]. ... [What if, she asks,] we began to see our everyday actions the same way that we look at the outbreak[?] ... Mathematically speaking, ... we [could] produc[e] exponentially more good in the world than cases of the virus. If we treat doing even one thing for another like an ‘infection,’ then before we know it, we have passed on something longer lasting than any illness. ... When I was little,” she says, “there was an elder at my home church, Mrs. Georgetta Tyson. Every Sunday, at the close of Sunday School, she would say to us, ‘Remember: Love is Contagious. Be A Carrier.’ I will admit that initially I thought that was catchy but corny. I rolled my eyes at the cliché nature of it. Then we entered this period. For a few weeks now, I have been constantly concerned with my transmissions and others’ transmissions to me. [But], I started directing my attention toward more things that I can actually control. Disease or not, I can make sure that I am carrying things that resonate deeply in the souls of others. ... I am attempting to infect others with hope and inject love into the universe. ... I [am] also [trying to] carry grace and mercy because spending this much time with others in my home makes it a requirement for living. ... We are [all] relevant,” she says. “We are [all] here for a reason. Sometimes we don’t have a clue what that reason is, but, ... [we can all be carriers of] love [We can all] transmit joy. [We can all] inject hope. And God knows ... I need [people] to infect me with those things right back.”

...Maybe as we gaze at today’s two scripture paintings, we can allow ourselves to be inspired by their vibrant colors of hope. Maybe we can all be carriers of hope right now. Transmitting joy. Passing on, during this time of distancing, what John Lennon calls “love, love, love.” Maybe we can be today Easter people, new life people, even as we all labor under the weight of this cross together. Amen.