

Come, O Breath (29Mar2020)

John 11; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11

“O mortal, can these bones live?”

This question in our first reading may match some of our sad uncertainty of these days: What about all these people, all these bodies, all these valleys where death is lingering?

Except where we continue watching as things get worse and death spreads, wondering what will happen with the sad *uncertainty*, I suppose our first reading had sad *certainty*. Bones stay dead. Can bones live? No. Perhaps our uncertainty still means possibility. Yet, even too late, the question is asked over bones, so it must mean something more than impossibility.

It's striking that this question is an interaction between God and a mortal, a theological engagement about death. Many of us turn to church and religion as part of seeking answers in such moments and especially these days. For things beyond our usual comprehension or worldview, as we yearn for clarity to relieve some of the sad uncertainty, we cry out of the depths and we ask God.

But in this Bible reading, it is God who asks. God questions the prophet Ezekiel, “O mortal, can these bones live?” We want answers. We want to know what will happen or why it happened. We turn to God most deeply for that, for our Why questions. The sad inquiry in the face of death are questions we ask, not questions we want God to ask of us. At that point we're not wondering what to do; it's too late for us to do anything. So we want to know what God is going to do about it.

To flip it around the correct direction, two faithful sisters who meet Jesus had a sick brother, Lazarus. Mary and Martha ask Jesus, ask God for help, for healing. These are also our faithful prayers and deep longings, wanting cures, care, assistance.

But what they wanted didn't come to pass. Jesus seemed to fail to show up to help. Lazarus died.

So Martha and Mary both press the next degree of sad questioning, this time as a lament: “If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.” They seem sure that this outcome was avoidable, that it didn't have to end up this way. Something else could've happened, and not only could've, but our faith in God says *should have*.

We have this inner sort of confidence. We expect to know the right answer and can judge what is best. It's hard on us generally, because things so frequently don't go how we want.

In these days that's exacerbated. I've found one of my refrains this week is that none of us really knows what's right, and we're all trying to do something right. We're wanting to figure it out. Nobody is trying to do wrong. For my part, it's made me a bit more humble, less judgmental, and more grateful. It makes me say to each of you: thank you for what you're doing. These are hard days and you are trying hard. So thank you. You're doing okay, as right as you can. Even if that's not enough, never enough, thank you for what you're doing.

And yet at this point in the crisis, it may not be going how we want. We're trying, but right now it isn't clear things are turning out very right.

So that puts us back to the theological question and the sad uncertainty, pointing out it didn't have to be this way, wondering if we expect good things from God, then where is God's action.

In the Gospel story, our questioning is met by Jesus with at least three responses. The first two are to the sisters. And they are very different responses to our human questioning, but both important answers from God.

One answer is teaching, rejuvenating of faith. It is invitational. Jesus reminds Martha that Lazarus will rise, that death has no dominion, that resurrection and life are in Jesus. Martha knows these answers, and so this is an opportunity for her to rededicate herself and be held by her faith when Jesus asks, “Do you believe this?” Yes, I believe.

We can ask that belief today. You trust that God is our good Creator, the eternal one, bigger

than our present conundrums and struggles. We are an Easter people, gathered around a cross to display that death will not have the last word, that when death has done its worst, it will be undone, and better things are to come. We look to the risen Jesus. Life wins. These days it may be vital to remember this grounding of our faith: do you believe this? Yes, I believe.

It's the reason we repeat creeds and statements of faith in worship, so we can be reminded of who our God is and put those words again on our own lips: yes, I believe.

If that intuitive reassurance seems like the move from us back toward God, then the second response from Jesus may illustrate the move in the other direction, from God to us and our human condition.

Mary voices the same question, of wanting more from God's presence. And Jesus goes with her. Physically. Goes with her to face death. to the tomb. Goes with her emotionally, a word at its root about how we are moved out from where we are to another. God goes out to where we are as we confront the hardness. Jesus weeps. This is a God of empathy, moving into your sorrows, a God of compassion, with you in suffering, God who goes all the way into death with you and for you. Maybe it's why we like the little verse "Jesus wept" so much, because it isn't about us trying to make our way to God, but the kernel of God knowing us and our experience.

But of course we don't just need a God who recognizes our problems and feels bad about them. We most of all need a God who will do something. So the third response from Jesus and God is to call Lazarus out of the tomb, to undo death. These bones can live, mortal. God answers God's own question. In the end, if we're asking Why questions of God—why did it happen? why didn't he keep his friend from dying?—God doesn't look back. God instead responds with action, with Now What answers.

I don't know much to say about that in these current events when we're looking for God, waiting with deep longings. Jesus didn't work on the sisters' timeline or respond how or when they

wanted. We'd like some clearer action of life right now. We wish and pray for it. The story doesn't resolve those rationalizing questions, it just moves to God's final answer. Before the big picture and final answer, I don't think this is just that we are looking in the wrong places, that we have inaccurate expectations of God's work.

We still look for explanations. For example, I like that the breath in Ezekiel comes from the four winds, from every corner of the earth. So I was wondering this week if there's something of God's Spirit that is a shared international spirit these days. We have global attention and concern. Our compassion and godly empathy know no national boundaries. On smaller scale, these have been days filled with neighborliness, with kindness, with creative sharing of life, even as we're physically separate nevertheless having a sense of connectedness that is far beyond usual. God may well be working in that. It may be godly.

But it's not enough of a solution that we all have a new appreciation of life and our relationships and simple things. That's nice, but it's not enough that something positive comes out of this. We need more answer from God. We need to overcome. We need life, to breathe safely and at peace.

As we are experiencing the risk of breath, when shared breathing contains possible contagion, of breath bringing death, for the third week in a row I find myself referring to God's good purifying breath that comes to you to give you life.

I take that as the small miracles of every single breath you take, God constantly renewing and breathing life into you. We take that as the hope of ventilators in these days, sustaining life. And maybe sewing masks to protect life.

But we also take it as something more, something we can't see and experience right now but that is the ultimate promise of God's action and God's response to deadly crisis. The bones will live, set free from death. Breath will come into them.

While we wait, we can keep trusting in that to come. For now, maybe there's something in the Romans reading. God's Spirit has already been put into you.

The passage goes on to say "you have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but a spirit" of relationship. A spirit of love. A spirit of peace. A spirit of life. (8:15)

You are filled with God's Spirit, in-spired so that you don't fall back captive to fear. The gospel message is so often "do not be afraid," from the Bethlehem shepherds to the Easter tomb, from the lips of Jesus, for all of our troubled hearts, that message then and for these days now isn't that there's nothing to fear. Of course these are fearful days. But when you are scared, God's Spirit fills your hearts so that you aren't confined by those fears. You are freed in hope, in faith, inspired to continue on, knowing there is more.

These bones will live. Come, O Breath.

