

Lent 5A Sermon March 29 2020 Coronavirus

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD..."

John 11:1-45

... Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

What story do we tell? What story do we tell?

That's the question that was asked at our Lenten Study on Friday night. Our study has been focusing on the story of Jesus' passion as it is told through the famous Passion play at Oberammergau, Germany. Passion plays were very popular during the Middle Ages in Europe. In 1634, the year of Oberammergau's *first* Passion Play, there were upward of 300 passion plays in the neighboring towns of the Bavarian and Tyrolean regions.¹ The story of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection was very popular, indeed.

But there was a problem: The story that was being told in these passion plays often became *more* than a story about Jesus; it became a story about the Jews who, according to many "good Christians," were responsible for Jesus' death. In some of these plays, the actors playing the parts of Jews wore horns; and in some of these plays, the actor playing Judas was the only actor wearing the color yellow: the color of the yellow stars which Jews had to wear during the time of Nazi regime in Germany. In fact, Adolph Hitler, speaking in 1942 about the Oberammergau Passion Play, said: "It is vital that the Passion play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the **menace** of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation..."²

Ironically, passion plays which told the story of Jesus, who was himself a Jew, often stirred up hatred of, and violence against, Jews; they perhaps even gave justification for what happened to the Jews under Hitler's regime.

But beginning in 1990, the new director of the Passion Play at Oberammergau decided he was going to change the script. He was going to tell a different story; a better story. Jesus, in the new script, stands, in one scene, in the synagogue, holds up a Torah Scroll, and recites, in Hebrew, the central statement of the Jewish faith, the Shema. And in the new Passion Play script, when Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council which deliberated about handing Jesus over to be crucified, **two** of the members of the Sanhedrin – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – vehemently dissent from that guilty verdict, pleading to have Jesus released.

The Director of the Passion Play at Oberammergau had decided to tell a better story, which brought out the truth that Jesus and his disciples *were Jews*, and that not **all** Jews *wanted* Jesus to be crucified.

So, what story do *we* tell?

What story do we tell about the times we are living in today? My friends, how we tell the story of these times will not only affect us today and tomorrow, and in the weeks and months to come, but will also affect how people interpret these times in years and centuries to come.

And here's the thing: we have a choice as to what story we tell.

We could, for instance, choose to tell a story which focuses on who is to blame.

Already, some people are telling the story that this coronavirus is a "Chinese virus," with the result that some Americans of Chinese descent are being violently attacked, and many Chinese Americans are now not only fearful of the virus, but of their fellow Americans.

Some people are telling the story that this or that politician or political party is to blame for the mess we are in, with the result that polarization in our country is, in some corners, *growing* ever greater; the feelings of hatred and bias and anger against our fellow Americans are being fanned into flame; and desperately needed ventilators, masks, virus test kits, and other medical supplies are becoming pawns in a political chess game, while people's lives hang in the balance.

Some people are telling a story of scarcity: that there isn't enough to be shared by everybody; with the result that some are hoarding toilet paper and hand sanitizer and staple foods, so that when others go to the grocery stores, there is nothing for them to buy.

What story do we tell?

Victor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the German concentration camps, reminded us that we don't get to choose our difficulties, but we **do** have the freedom to select how we will respond to them. We can **choose** what story we are going to tell in the face of our difficulties.

Conservative columnist David Brooks, in an article published 3 days ago, said that we find meaning in "the story we tell about this moment..."

And Brooks himself chooses to tell a better story. "The plague today is an invisible monster," he writes, "but it gives birth to a better world.

"This particular plague hits us at exactly the spots where we are weakest and exposes exactly those ills we had lazily come to tolerate. We're already a divided nation, and the plague makes us distance from one another. We define ourselves too much by our careers, and the plague threatens to sweep them away. We're a morally inarticulate culture, and now the fundamental moral questions apply.

"In this way the plague demands that we **address** our problems in ways we weren't forced to before..."

"Already, there's a new energy coming into the world."³

And then Brooks points to some of the positive ways people are choosing to respond to this crisis – some of the **better** stories people are telling about these times we are living in. He mentions the "online images of people finding ways to sing and dance together across distance."³ There was a Facebook post a few days ago that showed pictures of the various members of the Colorado Symphony each playing their own instrument at home, recorded on their webcam, and then on Facebook all those individual parts were brought together to play Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."⁴ In our own church family, people are calling or emailing one another to check in on them, sending cards and praying for one another, offering to run errands for one another.

We read in the Daily Record of all the ways our community is coming together. The Golden Age Center, Meals on Wheels and other organizations are making sure people have food. Mercy Today, which is our Lenten Journey focus this year, continues to hand out clothing and food staples and bagged lunches. Loaves and Fishes is doing heroic work, opening their shelter 24/7 to those experiencing homelessness, with the staff and volunteers at Loaves and Fishes risking getting sick themselves. Childcare workers in our own parish risk their health to take care of children, many of whose parents are working on the frontlines of this pandemic, in health care or other vital support services. Members of our own parish work on these frontlines in the medical field or in grocery stores or other vital support areas, again, putting their health on the line for the benefit of others.

Our Fremont County Department of Health and Human Services has asked for volunteers from churches to deliver food boxes, and I know that some of you have already volunteered.

Could not *this* be the story we choose to tell?

In normal times, our lives tend to be so hectic, so focused “out there;” yet during this time of staying at home, many of us have had the time to slow down our frantic busyness and scattered lives. With less outward activity, there is more time to look inward: to pray, read the Bible or other spiritual books or online posts or watch online videos. Many of us are getting out in our yards and reconnecting with nature, God’s First Bible. We are beginning to heed the words of the Psalmist who said, “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) David Brooks notes that “There’s a new introspection coming into the world... Everybody I talk to these days seems eager to have deeper conversations and ask more fundamental questions:

“Are you ready to die? If your lungs filled with fluid a week from Tuesday would you be content with the life you’ve lived?

“What would you do if a loved one died? Do you know where your most trusted spiritual and relational resources lie?

“Already there’s a shift of values coming to the world,” Brooks states. “We’re forced to be intentional about keeping up our human connections. Relationships get forged tighter by the pressure of mutual dread. Everybody hungers for tighter bonds and deeper care.”³

What story do we tell?

Is it a story which *blames* China or other politicians or political parties or government officials? Not only does this get us nowhere, it does more harm and violence in the long run; and it is less than honest. For what *defines* us today is not that we are a member of this nation or party or race or culture. This is a pan-demic – from the Greek words “pan,” “all,” and “demos,” people (as in democracy). Pandemic literally means “all people.” As David Brooks says, “The differences between red and blue don’t seem as acute on the gurneys of the [Emergency Room].”³

In his address to the “City and the World” on Friday, Pope Francis said, “we are all in the same boat.” And then he blessed **all** with a plenary indulgence – a universal mercy.

Now, we all know that when things start malfunctioning on our computer, oftentimes the solution lies in rebooting the computer: turning it off, cutting the power to our hard drive, and then starting it over again, afresh. I wonder if that is not the opportunity that lies before us now? With all the malfunction in our society and our world, the divisions and animosity between nations and cultures and political parties and religions and socio-economic class, perhaps we need a reboot of our world.

Perhaps we have arrived at a point when we are like dry bones in a desert valley, or a stinking corpse four days in the tomb. We have not been telling a very good story, and it's time we started telling a new one – a better one. Perhaps it is time for us, like Ezekiel, to prophesy over the dead bones of our broken world, so that we might come together, bone to bone, with connecting sinews and flesh and skin and the breath of Life. Perhaps it is time to shout with a loud voice to the stinking corpse of our dysfunction, “Come out!” so that new life might come forth from what has to die in the **bad** stories we have been both telling and living.

David Brooks says that we find meaning in the “story we tell about this moment... the way we tie *our* moment of suffering to a larger narrative of redemption...”³

The way we tie our moment of suffering to a larger narrative of redemption – the story of the dry bones given new life; the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead; the story of Jesus sharing our suffering and death and bringing forth from that death new and resurrected Life for all.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: “The Universal Christ is trying to communicate at the deepest intuitive level that there is only One Life, One Death, and One Suffering on this earth. We are all invited to ride the one wave, which is the only wave there is. Call it Reality, if you wish. But we are all in this together.”⁵

That's the True story; the best story. Now let's go live it.

AMEN

1 Rob Fuquay, *The Passion Play: Living the Story of Christ's Last Days*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019, p. 86

2 *Ibid.*, p. 85

3 “The Moral Meaning of the Plague,” by David Brooks, *The New York Times*, March 26, 2020

4 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1039638606404803> The Colorado Symphony says about this video: “Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is an ode to humanity, to peace over desperation, to universal kinship and, of course, to joy. We hope that this small tribute stands as a reminder that community is powerful and together, despite the anxiety and separation, we will come back stronger than before.”

5 Richard Rohr, “[One Life, One Death, One Suffering](#)” Daily Meditation, Wednesday, September 25, 2019

