

ST. JIM AND THE BONES AND BREATH OF MIRACLE

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 13, 2005

Portions of the appointed Texts for Lent-V, Year A:

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 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." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live Ezekiel 37:1-14

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ... When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ... He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 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?" ... 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." John 11:1-44

Looks like the passages from scripture today are miracle stories. For Ezekiel, it's all about 'dem bones, 'dem dry bones, all getting put back together again. That's a good one! And then there's the story of Jesus' friend, Lazarus, who's dead and gone; then brought back to the land of the living and the dying. That's a good one too. But, of course, there were plenty of other miracle stories in the gospel tradition handed down to us; so many, in fact, that Jesus the miracle-worker not only becomes the messianic fulfillment of Ezekiel's ancient prophecy, but the embodiment of a restorative life beyond the deadness of the past that may actually be more feared than fondly sought.

When it comes to miracles, the common assumption may be the challenge may hover around their believability; whereas, in fact, the problem with miracles may have more to do with the inhospitable way in with which we encounter miracles. Like the upset and dispute described in last week's gospel story about the man born blind, but given his sight while everyone else stumbles around in

their own darkness, miracles are not always welcome. Instead, miracles are problematic, if not downright feared.

It's interesting the way both believers and non-believers alike try to domesticate miracles. I recently read where the Roman Catholic Church is debating whether to relax the canonization requirements for sainthood. For example, it appears the late Mother Teresa has only achieved the rank beatification, because she lacks the minimum number of two *verifiable* miracles to qualify for saintly status. If you can't *prove* a miracle, or two, apparently you're no better than the rest of us. Sorry Mother T, we're *afraid* you don't qualify. On the other hand, miracles have a way of imposing themselves, verifiable or not, welcome or not.

For example, as luck would have it, I wasn't supposed to live past early childhood, because of a near-drowning incident when I was a toddler. Unnoticed, I'd wandered off from a cabin alone one morning while on a family summer vacation at a lake in northern Minnesota. Stumbling down to the dock, then beyond, I was discovered several minutes later lying face down in three feet of water, while the birds were chirping and the waves gently lapped against the shoreline. It was a family friend named Jim, who happened by, spotted me, pulled me out and resuscitated me until I was breathing normally again.

Too young to remember the incident myself, whenever my mother would retell the story in those early years, my siblings would tease how I was never quite the same after that; and, in a very real way, they were probably right. Encased in a watery tomb, I'd been hurriedly raised to the surface where I was revived, gasping for breath and the resumption of another miraculous life.

There would be other times, life-threatening times. Some would be merely speculative, like a low draft lottery number back in the sixties and a military deferment to go to seminary instead of the alternative. Others would be so real I could almost taste it: like a serious childhood disease, or the car spinning in circles on the rain-slick upper deck of the Bay Bridge. Those of us who are still vertical and breathing — we all have our own stories.

When I think back to the *first* time I nearly died — that day in a cool Minnesota lake, when I knew little of life and nothing of death — some would later surmise it was a young body's natural reaction to hold one's breath with shock in the chilly water until damn luck, or providence, could happen by. But either explanation is, of course, problematic. To say there is only a kind of cold, benign randomness to accidents that are granted a last-minute reprieve from their full consequences is as indefensible as the notion the all-knowing Creator selectively spares some in a capricious and inexplicable way. Call it what you like. Call me whatever you like: just a lucky kid or God's "little miracle." All I know is I'm standing here some fifty-five years later with enough hot air in my lungs to preach this message. And the question nowadays isn't much different than it was when I was sleeping with the fishes: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Or better, "Can these bones live *again*?"

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How many times have you found yourself cloaked in death? Or nearly frightened to death, short of breath, or nearly done to death? So much so your bones nearly rattled, and you could almost taste the dust of the earth from which you were made? And then through it all a part of you died. And a part of you obviously lived; for the time being anyway, which is all the time we've got in this life.

In our first scripture lesson, Ezekiel describes a period of time in a people's history; a part of their story that takes place between the great monarchy of David and the eventual restoration of Israel. What lies between is the exile. It's a "little death" story, when the Northern Kingdom was first defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and then the Babylonian king captured Judea, then destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. When the temple was reduced to rubble, the life breath of the people of Israel was snuffed out, as they were led off to Babylon in 597 BCE.

Ezekiel was amongst the exiles from Jerusalem. They were a people for whom life itself decomposed, where nothing remained but a skeleton kind of shell of a life; where the breath of God was as still and as silent as the wind.

Then he has a vision of a valley full of these dry bones for people, and the only question worth wasting one's breath to ask is, "Mortal, can these bones live again?" Then, like an answer to a prayer for a miracle, the command is given: "Prophesy to the breath ... and say to the breath, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. ... for our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost ..." And then — lest we find ourselves left in only wooden-headed thinking with feet of clay — the miracle is interpreted, not explained or dismissed: "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel ... But I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

2,600 years ago in Babylon the only question worth asking by a whole nation — if they were given breath to ask it — is the same question in my little story of a child and a Minnesota lake: "Can these bones live again?" If so, can we handle what such a miracle might mean?

I was reminded of my own story when I read of author Leif Enger's story in the book, *Peace Like a River*. The narrator, named Reuben, begins,

From my first breath in this world all I wanted was a good set of lungs and the air to fill them with ... When I was born in 1951 my lungs refused to kick in. ... My father wasn't in the delivery room, but had gone out to pace in the damp September wind. He was praying, rounding the block for the fifth time, when the air quickened. He opened his eyes and discovered he was running — sprinting across the grass toward the door.

"How'd you know?" I adored this story, made him tell it all the time.

"God told me you were in trouble."

"Out loud? Did you hear Him?"

"Nope, not out loud, Reuben. I guess I figured it out on the way."

By the time the father had arrived in the delivery room the doctor had done everything he could think of to start the baby's breathing. Minutes had passed and now the doctor was sitting on the side of the bed, consoling the mother. The child was lying lifeless and uncovered on a metal table across the room, ashen gray and beginning to cool. The father picked up the baby and gave it a one-word command, "Breathe." Nothing happened.

The Doctor tried explaining things to the father; about how it'd been twelve minutes; how sometimes there's something unworkable in one of the organs, so the lungs can't open and take in air; and how — in these cases — "we must trust in the Almighty to do what's best ..."

At that point in the story — unwilling to give up on the miracle of birth — the father steps across the room and clobbers the doctor. The grieving mother cries out in distress, but the father turns his attention to his lifeless son and — naming his child — commands, "Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe."

The narrator goes on to share what he makes of his own story:

The truth is, I didn't think about this much until a dozen years later, when I could then savor the fact that I'd begun life in a dangerous and thus romantic manner. When you're a kid there's nothing as lovely and tragic as telling your friends you were just about dead once. ... but only later did I wonder why I was allowed to breathe and keep breathing. The answer, it seems to me now, lies in the miracles.

He goes on:

Let me say something about that word, miracle. For too long its' been used to characterize things or events that, thought pleasant, are entirely normal. Peeping chicks at Easter time, a clear sunrise after an overcast week — miracle people say, as if they've been educated from greeting cards. I'm sorry, but nope. Such things are worth our notice every day of the week, but to call them miracles evaporates the strength of the word.

Real miracles bother people. It's true: they rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in. Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave — now there's a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time. When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up. A miracle contradicts the will of earth.

But here's the thing: People fear miracles. People fear miracles because they fear being changed. And people fear miracles because they fear being changed, though ignoring them will change you also.

In John's gospel story, we're left to only speculate how Lazarus' life was changed the day he stumbled out of the tomb, unwrapped from his funeral shroud and let loose. But if you don't think people fear miracles and the changes required of you as a result of them, I'll talk about that further next Sunday, Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday as it's also known; and that fearsome story we'll re-enact.

Meanwhile, suffice it to say half century ago along the shortline of a Minnesota lake a friend of my family was implicated in what was for me a verifiable miracle. As far as I'm concerned only one miracle is required for canonization; so I'll call him St. Jim: St. Jim, *and the bones and breath of miracle*.

Just look: all about us are strewn the sticks and stones of all the "little deaths" of our lives, like a valley of dry bones.

Now ask yourself: Can I envision a miracle in my own life? Or in this world; a world that could surely use a miracle? Consider how the bones and breath of miracle might change you. What it might require of you. And what change it might require in all the dubious ways of this world.

Amen. *jb+*