

When Our Need Is Greatest

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

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The recent catastrophe in Japan continues to haunt me, as I'm sure it does you. One reason is because it is not over. Every day I keep checking the latest news on the Fukushima Daiichi plant and whether progress is being made in preventing an even greater catastrophe there.

By the way, a few weeks ago we took a special offering for Japanese relief efforts and raised over \$1000. To date, partially because of an extremely generous donation, we have raised over \$4000 which has been directed to the United Church of Christ's Wider Church Ministries and their support of relief efforts through our denominational partners living and working in Japan.

The day of the earthquake and tsunami, I avoided watching video as much as I could, because I simply didn't think I wanted to be conscious of such images. Over the weeks I have, probably like the rest of you, been overwhelmed by those images and video which I have seen.

Japan seems to be living through their worst national nightmares all contained in one horrific event. One of the worst earthquakes ever experienced in human history, followed by one of the most devastating tsunamis, followed by nuclear meltdown and radiation poisoning.

In the ancient world, including the contexts in which the Bible was written, death was viewed as more than just the biological demise of an organism. Death was a cosmic force; an actual power that humanity and all creation had to contend with. The image of a black hooded skeleton carrying a scythe is a more recent cultural holdover of the same concept. Death, in the ancient imagination, wasn't necessarily a malevolent or evil force; sometimes Death was simply neutral, like that oncoming wave, overwhelming everything in its path.

Watching the events transpire in Japan in recent weeks, one realizes why we humans would ever have imagined Death as an entity rather than a mere fact, a force or power in its own right, that we must contend with.

And we've received a little taste of that here this week in Omaha. The paper on Thursday announced "twelve shootings in four days." A police officer had been murdered. A young man was killed in broad daylight in a city park in front of forty witnesses. And after two men were arguing, one shot the other one in the head in the lobby of the Creighton University Medical Center. Excuse me, but this week I began to feel like maybe we were living in the Wild West.

Death, loss, illness, grief, violence, depression, anxiety, fear – these experiences can sometimes feel less like facts and more like active forces or powers that we must contend with.

That's how the Jews felt after their conquest by the Babylonian empire and subsequent captivity and exile. Displaced from their homeland, and their way of life, filled with grief and

loss, how were they to hope again?

In the midst of this grief, the hand of God comes upon the prophet Ezekiel and in a vision brings him to the place of his greatest grief, the very place where the armies of Israel had been defeated. Now the bodies have decayed. There is no flesh or sinew left. The bones have baked in the sun and are *very* dry.

In the midst of this dark hour, of Ezekiel and his people's greatest need, God is present. The divine hand touches the prophet and carries him therapeutically through an encounter with his anxieties and grief. And God also provides a vision of hope, of future possibilities, of new life. With powerful and evocative words Ezekiel prophesies:

suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. . . . "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." . . . and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

This vision and prophecy in Ezekiel has become powerful for many people in their moments of greatest need. I once heard an aging English professor preach on this passage and how it comforted him as he felt his bones getting more brittle with time.

In my library is a commentary on Ezekiel written shortly after the First World War when Europe lay in ruins and an entire generation of youth had been wrecked. The author of that commentary, W. F. Lofthouse, a British Methodist and a Hebrew scholar, was concerned that the reconstruction of the social order be done in the right way and thought that the vision in Ezekiel could provide hope, support, and guidance for Europe in its dark hour.

It should be no surprise that this image became a powerful metaphor during the darkest moments of the AIDS holocaust in America. Jim Mitulski, the senior pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in San Francisco, used this vision to interpret his "pastoral experience and his own HIV experience." At the height of the crisis Jim would celebrate 500 hundred funerals a year. My friend and former boss Michael Piazza, who was pastor of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, talks about the period when their church performed eight funerals a week and lost over 1,000 church members to AIDS. There is psychological and spiritual trauma left by those experiences.

In Jim Mitulski's essay entitled "Ezekiel Understands AIDS," he writes:

People with HIV understand what it means to be viewed as expendable. We understand the impermanence of the body and its fragility. We understand what it means to be so paralyzed by grief that we cease to care whether we live or die, whether we protect our health or the health of others, whether we take our medications on time or even at all. People with HIV understand what it means to feel ashamed, shut down, nihilistic, and reckless. We understand what it means to be fearful of giving or receiving love. We understand what it means to lose the ability to plan for the future. We understand what it means to lose faith in God, in the community, and in our selves.

For those of you living with cancer, chronic depression, or schizophrenia, maybe your

experiences are similar. The power of this vision in Ezekiel is that it can speak to any of us in our moment of greatest need.

Many of the artistic renderings of Ezekiel 37 are stark portrayals of the valley filled with dry bones. Strangely, it is much more difficult to find artistic renderings of the army en fleshed, but, yet, isn't that what the vision is really about? The contemporary European painter Annelies Clarke has painted my favourite image of this vision. In the far left is the typical landscape of a desert valley with skeletons and a night sky. But the bones are in motion, drawing together into a skeleton that is first crawling and then rising up and taking on flesh so that in the very middle of the painting stands a beautiful man arms spread wide and striding confidently into the future, which is represented on the right-hand side of the painting by clear water, crashing waves, and the sun streaming through the parting clouds. Around him birds fly and sea creatures swim – setting this divine act of transformation within its larger context of new life and hope for all of God's creation. And the man . . . he is smiling from ear to ear in an unmistakable image of joy. That, my friends, is the real representation of Ezekiel's vision – one of hope and beauty and abundance.

Jim Mitulski grasps that as well. Shortly after his discussion of the experiences of those living with HIV and AIDS, he writes:

People with HIV also understand the innate desire of the soul and the body to overcome adversity and to survive. . . . We understand that resurrection when practiced daily and individually can become a collective reality. We understand the power of God to heal and to transform through hope. . . . [Our insights] help us to see and tell our own story as part of divine revelation.

Michael Piazza would echo that story. Despite the ravaging of the Dallas congregation, losing 1,000 members to one disease, they expanded, built a new building, grew to 4,000 members, planted five other churches, and became the third largest church in the United Church of Christ.

Reflecting on this experience years later in his book *Prophetic Renewal*, Michael wrote:

In case you have missed it, here is my point again: if it can happen here, it can happen there. If it can happen to us it can happen to you. . . . We, who have lost so many and so much, bear witness to the truth of the resurrection and seek to offer that reality to others. Surely your wilderness is no worse than ours. Take our hands; there is a land of promise for you, too.

So, what are we to do to care for one another in our times of greatest need? I believe that the answer is in these biblical texts -- in our imitating what God does. For the prophet Ezekiel, God's hand is upon him, God is present, giving a vision of hope and future possibilities. And, In the moment of Lazarus' death we read:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was

greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

This, to me, is one of those moments when we point to Jesus and say, "This is divinity. This is what God is."

Jesus expresses solidarity and compassion for his friends in their moment of need. And that is what we are to do in our care for one another. Being with each other, crying with each other, holding each other's hands – in those moments we imitate Jesus and God is revealed in us.

In August 1944, while imprisoned by the Nazis for participating in the resistance movement, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem entitled "The Friend" and sent it to his friend Eberhard Bethge for his birthday.

Like a clear fresh lake
in which the spirit cleans off the dust of the day,
in which it cools itself from the burning heat
and steels itself in the hour of fatigue –
like a fortress, to which, from danger and confusion,
the spirit returns,
in which it finds refuge, comfort, and strength,
is a friend to a friend.

Despite the fact that he was unable to maintain the practices that had sustained their relationship, Bonhoeffer, in his moment of need, still found his friendship with Bethge a source of peace and joy – a refuge, comfort, and strength.

In 1995 Bethge published a book entitled *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* that told about his friendship with the great theologian. Bethge wrote that it was "impossible to imagine [Bonhoeffer] without his friends."

Bonhoeffer shared his life, enjoyments, interests, work, and perils with his friends. They spent time with one another, played music together, helped each other, and enjoyed one another. As the resistance movement progressed, it became more difficult to maintain the practices that had sustained these friendships. However, that only meant that Bonhoeffer and his circle worked harder at it. For instance, Bethge writes about the Bonhoeffer family during this difficult period:

. . . their tradition of tending to the pleasurable sides of communicative activities -- even when turning points intruded which were anything but pleasurable and in fact brought genuine suffering – was never interrupted. Indeed, it was precisely at those times that they managed to pass on these values to children and grandchildren.

Once Bonhoeffer was imprisoned it became even more difficult to maintain his friendships. However, they devised ways to smuggle coded messages and letters out of the

prison.

During his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer began to reflect on the nature of friendship. He wrote:

Who, for instance, in our times can attend to music or friendship, play games or take pleasure in something with an easy mind?

In response to this question, Bethge tells a story:

Not long before, in 1942, we had gathered in the house of Ernst von Harnack, a co-conspirator who later was executed in 1945. There we had celebrated by playing Bach's Brandenburg Concertos together.

After inserting this story, Bethge goes on with Bonhoeffer's own answer to his question.

Surely not the 'ethical' person, but only the Christian.

As Bethge writes, "it meant someone 'fully human,' whom [Bonhoeffer] saw created in and through Christ."

Our Christian story gives us a unique perspective that is hopeful. God has conquered even death. Death does not have the final say. It may seem like an overwhelming power, but there is something even more powerful.

In the mist of difficult times – after an historic catastrophe, in the midst of violence, as a dread disease devastates the body, even during direct persecution – the testimony of scripture and our on-going, still-speaking Christian tradition is that we can hope, that our actions and our lives are not in vain. There is something greater than each of us individuals, something that sustains us, something that defeats the power of death over us.

And that thing is revealed in that briefest of biblical verses – Jesus wept. Compassion, love, friendship, solidarity in our suffering – those things are greater. May we live as God would have us live, caring for one another. "Take our hands; there is a land of promise for you, too."

O Holy and Merciful God, we are thankful for our life. We seek to be faithful to your will – to have the courage of our vision, to strengthen our covenant relationships, and, most especially today, we pray for hearts that open, as yours has opened unto us. This we pray. Amen.