

“Thanatopsis”

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Lent 5, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6–11; John 11:1–45

We human beings have a curious preoccupation with death.

We will watch television footage of the aftermath of fatal accidents, of the carnage of war, of genocide, of any act of heart-stopping violence and its result. We will listen in wonder and horror as witnesses tell us how someone came to die, or how others met disaster through famine, plague or storm. We will linger inexplicably at road accidents, or gaze at buildings ablaze, or listen, terrified, as another tells us of the misery and fear of those who die unjustly in faraway places, or on our own streets.

And we fill our entertainment with death and death-dealing. Some people will fixate on movie and video screens as monsters seek out innocent victims to mutilate. Others aren't much different: when we want to read a good mystery, of course, we read murder mysteries. When we want a good love story, a real tear-jerker, someone always dies. In Westerns the bad guys always get it in the end. And in adventures, justice does not come by the hero and the villain learning to make peace (Where's the thrill in that?); justice comes at the barrel of a gun.

The Greeks had a word for this preoccupation: thanatopsis. *Thanatos* means “death” and *opsis* means “regard.” And like anything in human existence, it seems, there is no exact good or bad in thanatopsis; but to prevent it from becoming mere fixation, it is important for us to understand it, to do something constructive with it.

We make a profound statement about ourselves when we give so much attention to our mortal condition. The message we tell each other is that life is short, brutal, and cheap. Paul the Apostle has said, “To set the mind on the flesh *is death*.”

One side of our thanatopsis is in the way we tend to think that beauty depends on one looking young or firm or both. And, of course, it doesn't.

I'm not arguing against a healthy lifestyle, here. Far from it. I'm just saying you can have an unhealthy preoccupation with avoiding dying.

In this same vein, Paul once said, “To set the mind on the flesh is death. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” In fact, also quoting Paul: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God!” These are harsh words, but words that we need to hear and understand, because it is so easy to become immersed in thanatopsis, concern about mortality, which is actually a pretty trivial aspect of living. I mean, basically, everybody dies.

God has wondrous things to do with us, individually and collectively, that outweigh (by every stretch of the imagination) the peril of death. We desperately need to become attuned to that fact, and to do something about it!

So, today's gospel lesson is about the raising of a dead person. It prefigures the story we will read in two weeks of the resurrection of Jesus, but it is not a resurrection story *per se*. The resurrection of Jesus is one which completely transforms his body. Lazarus, on the other hand, is resuscitated.

You might be able to tell: I am fascinated by this account in John because of the ways in which it is both like and unlike the story of Easter. I find myself intrigued by the way God reinvests life in someone clearly dead.

But I'm not the only one: over and over again in his letters, Paul uses the idea of resurrection as a metaphor for personal renewal. And I think John here is using Lazarus' case as a metaphor or an allegory for what happens in us when Christ really gets into our lives.

I interspersed the reading from the Gospels with the reading from the Prophets, because

that also has such an allegorical meaning here: people coming to life who have been dead. It's just that in the Gospel it is one person, and in Ezekiel, it's a community.

Ezekiel dreamed of standing in a valley of dry bones. When flesh was put on those bones, they gained the appearance of life, but it was not until something which could not be seen came into that people that they actually lived. This, Ezekiel tells us, is a metaphor for what the people of Israel would be like without their God. They would be the walking dead, biblical zombies roving the wilderness like creatures from a bad 'Fifties horror movie. Furthermore, that is what we are like if we, as Paul puts it, "walk in the flesh."

Paul was concerned about the corruptibility of the flesh and criticized in many places in his letters the practice of evils which flesh is heir to. More than just a thanatopsis, a fascination with death, "walking in the flesh" breeds all sorts of sins: in modern terms — pornography, child abuse, spouse abuse, abuse of the elderly, self-mutilation, chemical and other addictions, acting on the belief that violence will end violence (war, the death penalty), even simply hanging out with people who don't respect you. All of these amount to "walking in the flesh."

We've had entire periods in our history in which Americans have as a people walked in the flesh. Do you imagine that the entire episode of the bad ship *Amistad* could have taken place, had it not been for the fact that the United States had encoded slavery into the law of the land? The very idea, to question whether a group of men belonged to themselves or to someone else, and whether we ought to hand them back to their presumed owner or return them to their homes!

Many of you visited the replica when it was in the port of Chicago in 2000. The so-called mutineers had been stolen from their families and their people and their livelihoods, shipped across an ocean against their wills, stripped of every shred of dignity, in some cases even thrown overboard at the captain's whim, and when they came ashore in the United States we actually had the audacity to detain them in the prison system for five years until a series of trials could be concluded, to determine whether they were owned or not, and whether they could be prosecuted for mutiny! (Here we are, nearly two hundred years later, and I still get angry.)

The legacy of the *Amistad* must be kept in our remembrance. Because we continue to walk in the flesh, fixated with death and dealing in deathly ways with one another. According to a recent study by the Pew Center on the States, 2.3 million American adults are incarcerated; that's one out of every hundred; one in every 54 men over the age of eighteen; and one in every fifteen black males over 18. Among Hispanics, the number is one in 36 men. Women fare a little better 1 in every 580 behind bars, 1 in 203 black and 1 in 436 Hispanic.¹ Measured in dollars, incarcerations cost the United States \$49 billion last year, up from \$11 billion in 1988.

Conservatives will remind you as well that the abortion rate is soaring. And I would point out that rates of emotional and physical abuse, or in the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, are not decreasing by any stretch of the imagination. I do not fear for a lack of gainful productivity in my chosen field. There seems always to be room for a spiritual healer and teacher.

Paul used the metaphor of flesh for the ways of our world, because flesh is corruptible in so very many ways; just as gravity pulls our fleshly bodies down, our culture tends to as well. We cheapen the very life we cherish and thus find ourselves prone to a degree of *spiritual* corruption we can ill afford. This world of the flesh in which we live, Paul sought to argue, is full enough of its own corruption. That's why Jesus offered (and offers) us a way out.

¹ From *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, Pew Center for the States Public Safety Performance Project. Available online at http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/one_in_100.pdf

And John concurs. Consider the story of Lazarus.

His sisters complain to Jesus that, if only he had come, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus asks, “Where have you laid him?” and they and all those mourning with them take Jesus to the tomb.

So many people so convinced that death has had the last word!

Just like others we know? Maybe ourselves? I mean, none of this is without reason. A dear one dies, or is dying, or even just seems to be giving up the struggle, and those all around and among them lament the loss, sometimes prematurely.

You can almost hear the voice of God at such times in the hollowness of a moment, asking, “Mortal, can these bones live?” and the prophet saying, “Only you know, O God. Those bones are mighty dry!”

Our Savior who is the Resurrection and the Life grieves nothing so much as us children of God when our hope is so lost that we cut ourselves off from the very Source of our Being, when we no longer believe the Word but only vaguely recognize Good News, when we give up on life and life’s possibilities and blessings, when we ignore the renewal that awaits us in the Messiah.

But when we do accept the in-rush of the Spirit, the Breath of God, like those biblical zombies, we can be no longer expired but only inspired. In Ezekiel’s vision, they rose up to make something of themselves, a people for God... and so must we. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, that very God gives life to these death-bound bodies *through* the Spirit as the Spirit dwells in us. And the Spirit moves and rattles our bones, and fills our nostrils and loads our lungs afresh, as sinews and muscles and skin come together, restored and vital.

I have had numerous people through my office in the past few weeks, and no few of them are expressing their desire that we begin making a difference in the world rather than bemoaning our sagging finances and our weakened outreach. Well, people, what can I say but that Christ stands at the threshold of our sepulcher and calls in to us to COME OUT! If we are the resurrection people we claim to be, or even just the resuscitation people who would carry John’s metaphor forward, then we are the ones with the capacity to reverse the trends we have so recently been subject to and – let’s be honest – perpetrators of!

Christ need never mourn for us again. While we may have flesh, we are not *in the flesh*. If the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we can be in the spirit, not in the flesh. Jesus need never weep again. Our lungs can fill so that our lips can invite, our fists can open so that our money can flow, and our muscles can strengthen so that the lowly may be lifted up.

We are witnesses to and recipients of the same miracle as was worked with Lazarus, we can proclaim the Good News that there is another reality amid this world of corruptible flesh! We need not be fixated by a thanatopsis that removes us from where we are sent.

We are alive, and we can feed the hungry and clothe the naked and heal the sick and visit the forgotten. We can take care of one another’s needs and answer the Voice that calls us out, because though we were cut off from our spirit once, though we were dead, the Spirit has come upon us now and transformed our death into miraculous new life, life in Christ! Amen.