

March 26, 2023
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

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

Last week I realized something: for the rest of my life, I will probably associate the month of March less with blustery winds or the spring equinox or my cousin Lisa's birthday, and more with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Sunday, March 8, 2020, we had our last in-person pre-pandemic-shutdown worship service. On March 15 we canceled our worship service, and I suggested that everyone stream worship from Washington National Cathedral. On March 22 we had our first "virtual" worship service online via Zoom. You could say that this past Wednesday was the church's third Zoom birthday.

On that first Zoom Sunday, I don't think anyone began to imagine how very long we would be worshipping from home. It was nearly eighteen months later, on September 12, 2021, that we again gathered in person, outside in front of Robbins Hall. I lived through it, and I still find it hard to fully take in that we worshipped only on Zoom for *a year and a half*.

To briefly complete the history, we spent almost two months outside, finally moving inside on November 7, All Saints' Sunday. We went back home for the following Christmas through Epiphany but have been together in person since March 3, Ash Wednesday, of last year.

Because I am a clergy person, my life is largely ordered around church, so church contains the markers by which I trace the pandemic. You probably have your own. Still, whatever the markers, the pandemic anniversary has arrived. We spent a year and a half in extreme isolation and another year and a half in varying levels of alert. Perhaps this anniversary has stirred in you, as it has in me, some pondering.

Both corporately and individually, the full implications of the coronavirus pandemic are yet to be determined. We are still processing simple facts, such as knowing that a disproportionate number of the dead were over 65 years of age. We are still living the effects, such as the unprecedented mental health crises currently being experienced by small children.

But the point is the same: most of us were locked away—entombed, if you will—for what seems now like an incredibly long time. We have been emerging for an equally incredibly long time. I think we are still emerging.

The world has changed. We have changed. The world is still changing. We are still changing.

It's fitting that today's Hebrew Scripture and Gospel readings involve revival and resurrection. Ezekiel's story about the dry bones and John's story about Lazarus are two of the most stirring passages in the Bible. Between them we hear about both corporate and individual revivification. These patients are in need of much more than cardiac defibrillation. They are beyond hope. They're beyond hope, until they're not.

In the gospel story, Jesus knows that Lazarus is dying. He even lets it happen. John's gospel depicts Jesus as this rather stoic guy-in-charge, even when it comes to his own horrible death. It is never said here that Jesus raises Lazarus in order to save Lazarus. Rather, Jesus raises Lazarus in order to demonstrate the glory of God. Jesus' demonstration of God's glory is a running theme in John's gospel. In this story, he seems to have choreographed the action in every detail, and he is simply leading the others in following the steps. Only, wait a second. There is one bit that just has to make you wonder. Remember, this passage contains the shortest verse of the Bible: "Jesus wept." Of course, that's the translation in the King James Version. We heard it rendered as, "Jesus began to weep."

Jesus begins to weep. But his weeping isn't for Lazarus. After all, and he would know, Lazarus is just fine. Instead, Jesus weeps after he has been "disturbed," first by the weeping all around him and second by his walk to the tomb. Lazarus is just fine, but those mourning sisters and friends are *not* just fine. Therefore, and seemingly even to his own surprise, neither is Jesus.

Some say that God is eternally unchanged and unchanging. Much esoterica has been written about this by theologians much more expert than me. But I will try to say a little about it. To use the fancy theological terms involved, God is described as being *immutable* and *impassible*. One evangelical resource defines those terms this way: "Immutability means God does not change in any way. Impassibility, a corollary to immutability, means that God does not experience emotional change in any way; he does not suffer."¹ This immutability/impassibility tends to be connected to sin and the need for redemption. It's one example of the kind of churchy topic that I Google, and then roll my eyes at the results. One author said that when your house is on fire, you want a firefighter you can rely on. An evangelical pastor wrote this: "In the midst of temptation, wandering sheep need the doctrine of God's immutability. As doubts and fears assail, doubting sheep need a rock. And there is none in all the earth like our God—He never changes."²

I understand where this is coming from. But I'm not so sure. I want a reliable God, but reliability isn't incompatible with change. I rather think that, as doubts and fears assail, doubting sheep need not a rock but a shepherd. Also, we're not sheep. Doubting people need a compassionate pastor, a loving friend, a *weeping* Jesus. In other words, in our times of travail, we don't need a stoic, emotionally stunted God. Instead, in our times of travail, we need a God who still has the capacity to be disturbed and even changed by our weeping. If the Lazarus story is any indication, that's exactly the God we have.

I imagine that most people have times in their lives that feel like metaphorical entombment. Things happen that take our breath away, that shear the flesh from our bones. Sometimes it's so bad that God has to breathe for us, God has to put the flesh back on our bones. Sanctification, our growing in holiness, our drawing nearer to God, God's drawing nearer to us, is perhaps most pronounced in the depths of our entombment. Eventually we emerge, but we're always different than we were before. I think Lazarus was changed by his entombment; I think Jesus was changed by his. I think we are changed by ours, and the changes aren't ours alone. They spread through our communities; one person's entombment changes others. Why wouldn't God feel them all?

All this is not just about eternal life, and it's not just about us as isolated individuals. This story tells us, yet again, that Jesus is most concerned with events in this life, and that his concern for the individual relates to their place in community. It adds something more, that Jesus may yet be surprised by a stirring to compassion.

Here's one thing all this says to me: God is always with us, so we are never beyond hope. For our limp bodies, God has the cardiac defibrillator. I tend to think of hope as a feeling that must be cultivated. But maybe that's not quite right. Maybe hope just *is*, whether or not we give it any attention at all.

Notes

¹ Matthew Barrett, "The Immutability and Impassibility of God," The Gospel Coalition, available at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/immutability-impassibility-god/> (accessed March 27, 2023).

² Michael Abraham, as quoted in Jack Ashcraft, "What Is the Immutability of God?" Christianity.com, May 21, 2021, available online at <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/god/what-is-the-immutability-of-god.html> (accessed March 27, 2023).