

March 29, 2020  
The 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

Maybe it's me, but time feels weightier to me now than it has ever felt before. My temporal observations used to sound something like, "I'm late for my dental appointment" or "I can't possibly get everything done by Sunday." Now, it's "How long will we have to stay home?" and "When will the hospital be overwhelmed?" Paradoxically, while I'm hyper aware of time, I'm also having trouble gauging it. Effort is required to track the day of the week and the time of the day.

That may be one reason why I'm consuming more news more than I should. One article I read about maintaining one's mental health during this crisis suggested limiting one's news checks to once or twice a day. I have not met that standard. Events are developing so slowly that there's really no *need* to check the news more often. It's like a hurricane coming, in that you know that something's coming, even if you don't know how bad it will be; it's very *unlike* a hurricane coming, in that it's coming so slowly. This hurricane comparison probably relates to my personal history: I grew up in south Louisiana, where hurricanes occur regularly and where past hurricanes provide the relative disaster measuring stick.

One of the many news stories I saw this week was a collection of videos taken in several now-nearly-empty cities around the country: Los Angeles, Boston, Nashville, New York, New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> LA, Boston, Nashville, and New York were disturbing, but it was only when I saw the video of the familiar/unfamiliar French Quarter that I felt punched in the gut. Again, that's probably my personal history at play. If New York is the city that never sleeps, then New Orleans is the city that always parties. I read later in the week that, before they could close as ordered, some nightclubs in the French Quarter had to install new hardware on the doors: they hadn't closed in years and therefore didn't have locks. They don't ever actually close. Now, thanks to all that partying, New Orleans is a coronavirus hot spot.

News coverage about all that has referenced the horrendous New Orleans yellow fever epidemic of 1853.<sup>2</sup> 1854 and 1855 were also quite bad, but 1853 was the worst—about 8,000 people died in New Orleans. Yellow fever earned New Orleans the nickname "Necropolis," which means "city of the dead." I know all that because, coincidentally, just a couple of months ago I happened to do some Googling about it. I was interested because a distant cousin of mine had shared with me the family genealogy he has been working on. Most of my father's ancestors lived in St. John Parish in Louisiana; that's about 40 miles northwest of New Orleans on the same side—which is to say the east side—of the Mississippi River. Among the dozens, even hundreds, of people on that family tree, only two of them show a cause of death: the great-great-grandparents who died of yellow fever seven days apart in 1854. Three of their eight adult children also died in 1854; one can, presume they also died of yellow fever at around the same time.

Last week I mentioned that, because of the novel coronavirus, some things have already changed and will never be the same again. I expect that one of those forever-changed things is Lent. *This* Lent will enter our collective story as the reference point for every Lent that follows for the rest of our lives. We're still living the experience, so I can't yet say just how that reference point will end up orienting our future selves. But I do have some preliminary thoughts about it. I might as well warn you: these thoughts are as scattered as all my thoughts have been the last couple of weeks. Still, here goes.

One Christian theme highlighted during Lent is salvation by God through Jesus Christ. This crisis has revealed as literally fatally flawed at least two common American mindsets: hyper-individualism and anti-intellectualism. I don't know how long it will last, but suddenly our polarized nation seems largely to have united in realizing both that, one, every individual needs help, and two, some of the best help comes from science. These two realizations are supported by deep truths revealed from a theological—and particularly Trinitarian—perspective. First, hyper-individualism is the opposite of the communality of the Trinity. And second, anti-intellectualism must be at odds with the mind of the *logos*, the second person of the Trinity. Some corners of Christianity seem married to both hyper-individualism and anti-intellectualism. But it seems to me that those inclinations might rightly be understood as idolatrous and even *anti-Christian*.

One obvious Lenten theme that has taken on new power during this crisis is that of mortality. Suddenly this Lent I'm super aware of my own mortality—so much so that I am now scurrying to update the wills that should have been updated several years ago. For those same previously mentioned corners of Christianity, concern with mortality is obsession with potential damnation. We might not be *too* concerned about that and still have plenty of other things to be fearful about. None of us wants to die any sooner than we have to; none of us wants to lose loved ones any sooner than we have to. I might add that, closely related to concern over mortality is concern about vulnerability and uncertainty. We want to keep our status and livelihood and *things*. Power and privilege, even if unearned, do in fact help insure us against the effects of vulnerability and uncertainty. But we now have fresh evidence that power and privilege only do so much. They are also ultimately false and, one might argue, therefore also idolatrous. Instead, security lies ultimately in the Trinitarian God I just mentioned.

Let's stir into this mix the two readings we heard today. In these stories, God reaches into the community of God's people, re-enfleshing those dry bones and re-quickening the dead Lazarus.

Now, to be honest, with all that's going on right now, I had a really hard time getting my head around dry bones coming to life and Lazarus emerging from the tomb. After all, the pandemic is not expected to end any time soon, and we are facing what is likely to feel like a long extended "Lent."

But here's the thing: metaphorically speaking, there *will* be times when our bones are the ones lying bare in the sun, times when our flesh is that flesh lying dead in the tomb. And there *will* be times when we aren't *ready* for metaphorical re-enfleshment or re-quickening. In those times, it's okay to let ourselves rest exactly where we are.

Even so, even as we let ourselves rest where we are, we need to keep telling the stories; we need to keep telling the stories, even if it seems like no one is able to hear them. We tell the stories in good times, so that they become part of who we are. We tell them in bad times, because they recall us to our deepest truth.

Even though I wasn't there, my great-great-great-grandparents died of yellow fever, but one adult child who didn't die later continued the line that led to me. Even when I don't expect it, video of New Orleans punches me in the gut. These things are part of who I am, conscious or not, expected or not.

Right now, time feels less like a stream and more like an ocean. Maybe time is just a great stew that contains all that we are and all that we will be—including our ancestors and our descendants—the biological ones and the ones that make up our families of choice. Our Christian family and our Christian stories are in there in the mix. They're there for us when we need them. We keep telling the stories, for ourselves, and for our children.

In our stories, God gives life to real people—ordinary people, people like me, and people like you. That's about life, not just in the after-life, but in the *during*-life. God enfleshes us and breathes life into us; when we least expect it, Jesus quickens us and calls us from the tomb—not just once, but every time we need it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Matt Novak, "Drones Capture Video of Nearly Empty American Cities in Lockdown," *Gizmodo*, March 23, 2020, available at <https://gizmodo.com/drones-capture-video-of-nearly-empty-american-cities-in-1842440433> (accessed March 29, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Leah Donnelly, "How Yellow Fever Turned New Orleans Into The 'City Of The Dead,'" *The New York Times*, October 31, 2018, available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/10/31/415535913/how-yellow-fever-turned-new-orleans-into-the-city-of-the-dead> (accessed March 29, 2020).