

“The Wasteland”

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-53

He asked me, “Human one, can these bones live again?”

I said, “LORD God, only you know.”

Ezekiel 37:3

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to discern what is true from what is false.

Help us to be bold to ask questions and trust you in the process.

Amen

The conclusion of John 11 – the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as it is written in RSV, goes like this:

*46 but some of them went to the Pharisees
and told them what Jesus had done.*

*47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said,
“What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.*

*48 If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him,
and the Romans will come and destroy
both our holy place and our nation.”*

They were afraid of an apocalyptic ‘end of days’ that would sweep away Judea, Judeans, and the Jewish way of life.

In the course of history,

the Romans did just about that in the Jewish-Roman War of 73-74 CE.

The first Christians had been hoping for the imminent end of the world,

but as a ‘Revelation’ of God’s Kingdom, upon Christ’s triumphant return.

Christianity survived its own times of tribulation and persecution by the Romans with a miraculous reversal to become the state religion of the Empire – even though the Church became domesticated in the process.

It has been a struggle ever since as the Christian “Church” continues to adapt to the times through repeated efforts to get back to the basics.

We are living in such a time again – a time of uncertainty about the destiny of the Church as well as the wider community of American society.

We are all waiting to see what will happen in the course of events

that are simply out of our control – and even out of the control of those who are players on the global stage.

Willard, p.2

In the 1960s, the threat was very real with the standoff between US and Soviet nuclear forces which could have ended in “mutual assured destruction” and the world becoming a nuclear wasteland.

The tipping point in the nuclear arms race was in 1989 when the USSR could no longer keep up economically, and *that union* of Soviet republics disintegrated with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Yet once again, lines in the sand are being drawn between people, along national and ideological lines...

Time will tell how it all plays out – though history usually gets written by the winners to their advantage.

We already know from history about the kind of dangers that exist from manipulating and silencing the media.

Because of the free flow of information in our open society – unlike the media control of a ‘deep state’, we can still get insight about our own time.

It seems though that our problem is too much information – or too little that means anything;

and more and more, the medium itself is the message.

Texting threatens to distract us not only from what’s happening on the road, but also from relating to people in the same room...

In 1961, the chair of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton N. Minow, observed this about TV:

When television is good,

nothing – not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers – nothing is better.

But when television is bad, nothing is worse.

He went on to say:

I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set

when your station goes on the air and stay there for a day

without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper,

without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you.

Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off.

I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.

Willard, p.3

He was a visionary – though he admitted he could never have anticipated the role that TV would play in our culture and the world.

Still, he considered his greatest contribution to having helped promote public television and communication satellites.

His quote about TV as ‘a vast wasteland’ has continued to challenge us to be aware of how visual media has changed into personal computers, i-phones, and surveillance devices that even seek to influence our behavior.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton_N._Minow

The term ‘wasteland’ carries more than a symbolic meaning for us these days – there is a very real threat of climate change,

whether we acknowledge this as the consequences of natural cycles or through the direct impact of humankind on our environment.

Scientists line up on both sides of the issue,

so we have to carefully discriminate what is accurate.

That can be said about many issues these days –

especially as they pass through the filters of various internet media outlets.

I was working as an intern for the City Mission Society in Boston

the summer of 1986, when I came across another reference to ‘wasteland’ as a metaphor of social desolation – though that term was not used.

While visiting the Boston Public Library, I happened to discover the Abbey Room on the 2nd Floor – which had a series of paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey on the walls, all along the edge of the ceiling.

They were painted in the realistic style of classic illustration from the late 1800s and 1900s like the works of

Howard Pyle, NC Wyeth, and Norman Rockwell – and they were illustrations of the Legend of the Holy Grail.

At the Library, I purchased a collection of postcards with these paintings and a pamphlet that included a description and summary of the legend by novelist Henry James.

In this version of the story, King Arthur’s knights are sent off on a quest to find the Holy Grail – and Sir Galahad discovers its location in the castle of a wounded king.

However, because he fails to ask the ‘Question’, the land remains ravaged by war and desolation –a wasteland.

It is not until he returns after many years to “ask the question” that the Grail reappears, the king is healed, and grace is poured out upon the land allowing peace and prosperity to return – a hopeful vision of God’s transformative grace...

<http://www.bpl.org/central/abbey.htm>

Willard, p.4

Not all apocalyptic literature about the 'end times' are visions that end in violence.

The prophetic images that came to Ezekiel describe a time of renewal and restoration of the people of Israel –
though there was more violence ahead for them.

Even so, this vision was given to them while they were still in Babylonian exile and it was meant to give them a hopeful goal for what could yet be.

We all have our own 'end time', our 'apocalypse' – which is just another word for 'revelation', the revealing of our personal date with Ultimate Reality.

Jesus has given us such a vision with the raising of Lazarus to teach about the power of God and that there is more to this life than we know.

Do I expect you to believe in miracles like Jesus feeding 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish? Or walking on water?
Or being raised from the dead?

A better question is 'What do these stories signify about what is really important?'

Questions are important in both these lessons today:

God says to Ezekiel,

"Human one, can these bones live again?"

and Jesus says to Martha,

"Did I not tell you that

if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"

Like the Grail Legend, such questions are meant to evoke more questions – from us.

We are expected to ask questions in turn.

We are expected to go out on our own personal quests for what is true.

We are expected not to 'sit on [our] nickel's worth of knowledge

like it was the great Inca treasure'[from Richard McKenna's The Sand Pebbles],

but to go find out what is true.

That way you won't be bulldozed by 'fake news' or bamboozled by partisan prejudice, because you will know the difference between that and what is true...

Amen

Our lesson today from Ezekiel 37:1-14, describes a vision of hope for the Judean exiles after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. It symbolizes national renewal and social transformation...

[The Prophet Ezekiel said,]

¹The LORD's power overcame me, and while I was in the LORD's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley.

It was full of bones.

² He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³ He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?"

I said, "LORD God, only you know."

⁴ He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the LORD's word!

⁵ The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again.

⁶ I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD."

⁷ I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone.

⁸ When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them.

⁹ He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The LORD God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."

¹⁰ I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company.

¹¹ He said to me,

“Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say,
‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished.
We are completely finished.’

¹² So now, prophesy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims:

I’m opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves,
my people,

and I will bring you to Israel’s fertile land.

¹³ You will know that I am the LORD,

when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my
people.

¹⁴ I will put my breath in you, and you will live.

I will plant you on your fertile land,

and you will know that I am the LORD.

I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the LORD says.”

Let us be challenged and guided and by these words...

John 11:1-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Laz'arus of Bethany,
the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

²It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair,
whose brother Laz'arus was ill.

³So the sisters sent to him, saying,
"Lord, he whom you love is ill."

⁴But when Jesus heard it he said,
"This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God,
so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz'arus.

⁶So when he heard that he was ill,
he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples,
"Let us go into Judea again."

⁸The disciples said to him,
"Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you,
and are you going there again?"

⁹Jesus answered,
"Are there not twelve hours in the day?
If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble,
because he sees the light of this world.

¹⁰But if any one walks in the night,
he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

¹¹Thus he spoke, and then he said to them,
"Our friend Laz'arus has fallen asleep,
but I go to awake him out of sleep."

¹²The disciples said to him,
"Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

¹³Now Jesus had spoken of his death,
but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly,
"Laz'arus is dead; ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad that I was not there,
so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples,
"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came,
he found that Laz'arus^[a] had already been in the tomb four days.

¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles^[b] off,
¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them
concerning their brother.

²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him,
while Mary sat in the house.
²¹ Martha said to Jesus,
“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
²² And even now I know that whatever you ask from God,
God will give you.”

²³ Jesus said to her,
“Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ Martha said to him,
“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus said to her,
“I am the resurrection and the life;^[c] he who believes in me, though he die,
yet shall he live, ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.
Do you believe this?”

²⁷ She said to him,
“Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,
he who is coming into the world.”

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly,
“The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”
²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.

³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village,
but was still in the place where Martha had met him.

³¹ When the [Judeans] who were with her in the house, consoling her,
saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her,
supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

³² Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him,
fell at his feet, saying to him,
“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the [Judeans] who came with her also weeping,
he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; ³⁴ and he said,
“Where have you laid him?”

They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ So the [Judeans] said, “See how he loved him!”
³⁷ But some of them said,
“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man
have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb;
it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

³⁹ Jesus said,
 “Take away the stone.”
Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him,
 “Lord, by this time there will be an odor,
 for he has been dead four days.”
⁴⁰ Jesus said to her,
 “Did I not tell you that if you would believe
 you would see the glory of God?”
⁴¹ So they took away the stone.
And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said,
 “Father,
 I thank thee that thou hast heard me.
⁴² I knew that thou hearest me always,
 but I have said this on account of the people standing by,
 that they may believe that thou didst send me.”
⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice,
 “Laz’arus, come out.”
⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages,
and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them,
 “Unbind him, and let him go.”
⁴⁵ Many of the [Judeans] therefore, who had come with Mary
and had seen what he did, believed in him;

⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.
⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said,
 “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.
 ⁴⁸ If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him,
 and the Romans will come and destroy
 both our holy place^[d] and our nation.”
⁴⁹ But one of them, Ca’iaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them,
 “⁵⁰ You know nothing at all;
 you do not understand that it is expedient for you
 that one man should die for the people,
 and that the whole nation should not perish.”
⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied
that Jesus should die for the nation,
 ⁵² and not for the nation only,
 but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.
⁵³ So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death.

Inspired by John 11:1-57

THEN, A CERTAIN PERSON WAS STRICKEN ILL.

IT WAS LAZARUS OF BETHANY, THE VILLAGE OF MARY
AND HER SISTER, MARTHA.

INDEED, IT WAS THIS SAME MARY,

WHO HAD ANOINTED THE LORD WITH OIL,
AND DRIED HIS FEET WITH HER HAIR –
WHOSE BROTHER WAS LAZARUS!

SO, MARY SENT A MESSAGE TO JESUS SAYING,

“LORD, ONE WHO IS YOUR BELOVED FRIEND
IS DEATHLY SICK.”

BUT AFTER HEARING THIS, JESUS SAID,

“THIS SICKNESS WILL NOT LEAD TO DEATH,
BUT IT IS FOR THE SAKE OF GOD’S BLESSING
THAT THE SON OF GOD WILL BE
BLESSED THROUGH HIM.

SO, EVEN THOUGH HE KNEW THIS WAS AN EMERGENCY,
JESUS STAYED WHERE HE WAS FOR TWO DAYS.

AFTERWARDS, HE SAID TO THE DISCIPLES,

“LET’S GO BACK TO JUDEA.”

THE DISCIPLES SAID TO HIM,

“RABBI, LATELY THE JUDEANS HAVE BEEN
OUT TO STONE YOU!

AND YOU WANT TO GO BACK THERE AGAIN?”

JESUS ANSWERED,

“ARE THERE NOT TWELVE HOURS OF DAYLIGHT
WHEN ANYONE CAN GO ABOUT
THROUGH THE DAY
WITHOUT BUMPING INTO SOMETHING
BECAUSE THEY SEE
BY THE LIGHT OF THIS WORLD?”

“BUT WHEN SOMEONE GOES ABOUT AT NIGHT,
THEY BUMP INTO THINGS
IF THEY HAVE NO LIGHT WITH THEM...
LAZARUS, OUR DEAR FRIEND, HAS FALLEN ASLEEP
SO I AM GOING TO AWAKEN HIM.”

THEN THE DISCIPLES SAID,

“LORD, IF HE HAS ONLY FALLEN ASLEEP,
HE WILL BE ALRIGHT.”

BUT JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT THE DEATH OF LAZARUS;
SO AS TO ENLIGHTEN THEM ABOUT

THIS ‘FALLING TO SLEEP’,
HE SPOKE ABOUT SLEEP,
BUT NOW HE TOLD THEM BLUNTLY,
“LAZARUS IS DEAD!

AND I HOPE YOU WILL COME TO BELIEVE
BECAUSE WE WERE NOT THERE.

BUT NO MATTER WHAT,
I AM GOING TO HIM!”

THEN, THOMAS, THE ONE CALLED ‘THE TWIN’,
SAID TO HIS FELLOW DISCIPLES,
“LET’S ALSO GO AND DIE WITH HIM!”

JESUS CAME TO FIND THAT LAZARUS WAS ALREADY
IN THE TOMB FOR FOUR DAYS.

NOW, BETHANY IS NEAR JERUSALEM,
ABOUT TWO MILES AWAY;

SO, MANY JUDEANS HAD COME IN ORDER TO
CONSOLE MARTHA AND MARY
ABOUT THEIR BROTHER.

AND AFTER HEARING THAT JESUS HAD ARRIVED,
MARTHA WENT OUT TO MEET HIM –
BUT MARY STAYED HOME...

MEANWHILE, MARTHA CONFRONTED JESUS, SAYING,

“LORD, IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE
MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED –
BECAUSE I KNOW THAT WHATEVER
WOULD HAVE BEEN ASKED OF GOD,
GOD WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU!”

JESUS SAID TO HER,
“I WILL RAISE UP YOUR BROTHER!”
MARTHA SAID TO HIM,
“I KNOW THAT THERE WILL BE A ‘RAISING UP’
IN THE RESURRECTION AT THE END OF TIME...”

JESUS SAID TO HER,
“I AM THE ONE WHO RAISES UP
AND THE ONE WHO GIVES LIFE.
THOSE WHO TRUST ME WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED
AND THOSE WHO LIVE TRUSTING IN ME
WILL NOT DIE IN THE TIME TO COME.
DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?”

SHE SAID TO HIM,
“YES, LORD, I BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE MESSIAH,
THE ONE WHO DESCENDED FROM GOD,
THE ONE WHO IS PROCEEDING INTO THE WORLD!”

AND HAVING SAID THIS, SHE DEPARTED AND
SPOKE PRIVATELY WITH HER SISTER, MARY, SAYING,
“THE RABBI, THE TEACHER, IS HERE
AND...HE NEEDS YOU!”

UPON HEARING THIS,
SHE GOT UP QUICKLY AND WENT OUT TO HIM.
WHEN THE JUDEANS,
WHO WERE GRIEVING WITH MARY IN THE HOUSE,
SAW HER GET UP QUICKLY AND GO OUT,
THEY SUPPOSED THAT SHE WAS GOING TO THE TOMB
TO MOURN THERE – SO THEY FOLLOWED ...

NOW, JESUS HAD NOT YET ENTERED THE VILLAGE,
BUT WAS STILL ON THE HILL WHERE
MARTHA HAD MET HIM.
WHEN MARY CAME TO THE PLACE WHERE JESUS WAS,
SHE LOOKED AT HIM ...
AND KNELT DOWN BEFORE HIM, SAYING,
“LORD, IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE
MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.”
WHEN JESUS SAW HER CRYING AND THOSE JUDEANS
WHO HAD COME WITH HER ALSO CRYING,
HE WAS OVERWHELMED IN THE SPIRIT –
HE, HIMSELF, WAS DEEPLY MOVED!

AND HE SAID,
“WHERE DID YOU LAY HIM DOWN?”
THEY SAID TO HIM,
“LORD, COME AND SEE. FOR YOURSELF.”
JESUS BURST INTO TEARS.

THEN, THE JUDEANS SAID,
“DO YOU SEE HOW HE LOVED HIM?”
STILL SOMEONE SAID,
“COULD NOT THIS FELLOW,
WHO OPENED THE EYES OF BLIND PEOPLE,
THEREFORE BE ABLE
TO RAISE UP THIS PERSON, TOO?”

AS HE APPROACHED THE TOMB,
AGAIN JESUS WAS OVERWHELMED WITH EMOTION.
NOW, THE TOMB WAS COVERED WITH A ROCK UPON IT,
AND JESUS SAID,
“SOMEONE LIFT UP THE ROCK.”
BUT MARTHA, THE SISTER OF THE ONE WHO HAD DIED,
SAID,
“LORD, THERE WILL BE CORRUPTION,
BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN FOUR DAYS!”
JESUS SAID TO HER,
“DIDN'T I SAY TO YOU THAT YOU WOULD SEE
GOD'S BLESSING IF YOU TRUST ME?”
SO, THE ROCK WAS LIFTED UP.

AND JESUS LIFTED UP HIS EYES TO HEAVEN AND SAID,
“I THANK THEE ABBA, FATHER,
FOR LISTENING TO ME.
NOW, I KNOW THAT THOU HEAR ME ALWAYS!
BUT SPEAK THROUGH
THIS CROWD STANDING ABOUT
SO THAT THEY WILL KNOW
THAT THOU SENT ME!”

HAVING SAID THIS, JESUS CRIED OUT IN A LOUD VOICE,
“LAZARUS! COME OUT!”

[AND] THE ONE WHO HAD DIED CAME OUT,
HIS HANDS AND FEET STILL TIED,
HIS FACE WRAPPED IN A COVERING.
JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO!”

SO, ALL THE JUDEANS WHO CAME WITH MARY
AND SAW WHAT HAPPENED, BELIEVED IN HIM.
STILL SOME WENT TO TELL THE PHARISEES –
WHO GATHERED AT THE COUNCIL AND TALKED...
“HOW IS IT THAT THIS FELLOW IS
DOING ALL THESE WONDER-WORKS?”
IF WE PERMIT THIS TO GO ON,
EVERYONE WILL CERTAINLY... WILL CERTAINLY...
BELIEVE IN HIM!”
“AND THE ROMANS WILL BE UNLEASHED AGAINST US
AND SWEEP US AWAY FROM OUR OWN LAND
AS WELL AS OUR WAY OF LIFE!”

BUT ONE WHO WAS PROMINENT AMONG THEM – CAIAPHAS,
WHO WAS HIGH-PRIEST THAT YEAR, SAID TO THEM,
“YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND ANY OF THIS AT ALL!
YOU HAVE NOT REASONED AS TO HOW IT
FITS TOGETHER FOR YOUR OWN PURPOSE:
THAT ONE PERSON DIE
FOR THE SAKE OF THE PEOPLE
SO THAT THE WHOLE NATION
WILL NOT BE DESTROYED.”
NOW, HE DID NOT IMPART THIS AS HIS OWN OPINION,
BUT AS ‘HIGH-PRIEST OF THE YEAR’ HE PROPHESED
THAT THIS WOULD CERTAINLY TAKE PLACE:
“JESUS WILL DIE FOR THE NATION,
YET NOT FOR THE NATION ALONE,
BUT SO THAT ALL THE SCATTERED
CHILDREN OF GOD
WILL BE GATHERED TOGETHER IN UNITY!”

AND FROM THEN ON, THEY DELIBERATED
AS TO HOW TO PUT JESUS TO DEATH.