

“Come Out”

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

“... [Jesus] cried with a loud voice,
‘Lazarus, come out!’

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth,
and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to them,

‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ ”

John 11:1-43b-44

Let us pray... O God,

Call us forth from wherever we are stuck in life,
faced with oppression or dis-ease.

And as we are freed from negative influences and bad habits,
empower us to be your voice in this world to call others forth
into a life of freedom to follow your ways of truth and love.

Amen

I was sick this week.

There were still things I had to do
and dragged myself around to do them.

Not fun, when you're not feeling well and
can't do easily the things you otherwise do.

Slows you down though and you find yourself doing other things instead
you might not otherwise have taken the time to do,

I happened to pick up a copy of

The Norton Anthology of American Literature
and started reading about Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass looked very similar to our statue in the Narthex
whom I like to think of as “Black Jesus”.

Yes, Frederick Douglass himself looked like a tough character
considering he was once a former slave and had become
one of the foremost orators of his day
widely known for his work against slavery.

The essay was about his early life – around the time he was 16
and he recounts the last time he would allow himself to be beaten.

He had bonded out for a year from his master to a farmer named Covey
who regularly beat him.

Willard, p.2

When he was sick and Covey continued to brutalize him,
Frederick escaped back to his master Thomas Auld
for fear of his life.

Auld told him to go back –
though he allowed him a night of rest that was no rest.

On his return, he was ambushed by Covey,
yet Frederick was able to escape into the woods.

He was sick, exhausted, and hadn't eaten for a day
and weighed his chances of escape –
his enemy knew his hunger would drive him home.

There in the woods, he was – in his words,
'hid from all human eyes; shut in with nature and nature's God,
and absent from all human contrivances.
Here was a good place to pray; to pray for help for deliverance –
a prayer I had often made before.

But how could I pray? '
Frederick compared himself with his master and his tormentor,
and lacked the self-esteem to even pray.
He thought religion was a sham anyway.

It was in the midst of this dark forest at night,
that he heard a man walking and this turned out to be a fellow slave
from a neighboring farm –
his name was Sandy and he was known for his kindness and wisdom.
Sandy took him in at some risk to his own home where Frederick was given
a meal he never forgot and was allowed to rest,
but Sandy urged him to return and face Covey
and against his fears, he would do so.

Sandy had given Frederick some herbal roots to carry in his pocket
as spiritual protection against beatings.

Frederick didn't trust this kind of religion either,
but was amazed when he walked onto Covey's farm just as
Covey was getting ready to go to church Sunday morning.

Sure enough Covey seemed transformed
and was kind in his words, welcoming him back to the farm.

But Frederick was convinced that it was his antagonist's unwillingness
to break the Sabbath and not the roots that made a difference.

Willard, p.4

Things went by without incident – until the next morning
when Covey tried to surprise Frederick by the barn –
but this time Frederick protected himself.

They struggled for two hours to a stalemate –
for Frederick did not strike any blows of vengeance.

Though, Covey was unrepentant in his words,
he never again attacked Frederick.

And no word ever got out about this incident,
for this fellow had a reputation as someone who ‘broke’ slaves.

From then on,
Frederick was resolved never to be treated with brutality again,
and he never was until he finally made good his escape.

As believing people, we can see how God was at work in this story –
in the midst of the troubles that humankind is heir to.

We can claim the work of God’s providence when
a person shows up to provide food, shelter, and good advice;
or when
the day of the week and an enemy’s superstitions coincide;
and even when
the stress brought on by fatigue, hunger, and fear of death
provokes a person to desperate action
that brings forth the gold within as an example for us all.

We have the example of a former slave
who became one of the greatest voices for freedom
in this country and the world –
a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln.

We have the example of Sayville Congregational United Church of Christ
whose pastor announced he was gay and had a partner
and how that congregation accepted him –
but then had to defend that acceptance
from condemnation and protests by the wider community.

That is a church that has been “open & affirming” since 1993
and I don’t know the whole story yet,
but there are many of you who came from there who do.

Willard, p.3

Martin Luther King said, “Freedom isn’t free”,
but it needs to be added that it’s worth it no matter what the cost.
It’s not about doing your own thing or pleasure-seeking,
but about standing up for what you must be and do.

Jesus said to Lazarus,
‘Come out!’ Come out of the tomb.
He could have said to gender-specific people
‘Come out of the closet!’ Come out and be who you are.
Come out and become who you already are.

Some of you are already there and grew up nurtured by family & church
to know that you are already accepted
and you learned to accept yourself.
So, those of you didn’t have a dramatic conversion experience,
dis-abuse yourself of that notion.

At one time, it was required for a believer’s baptism that a person
had to tell the story of how they became a Christian
and they had to sit on the ‘anxious bench’
before their turn to tell it.

It is enough for this church to love and be loved –
tell that story if you want.
Tell the story about what you love,
because what you love first came from the Creator.

And when you live your life by being creative –
by doing what you love, you are living into your birthright
as having been created in the image of God the Creator
whose name means, ‘I Am Who I Am’, or I Am Who I Will Become –
which is another way of saying,
‘Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma’,

To be ‘saved’ is to be ‘accepted’.
So, save yourself by accepting your acceptance.
Because Jesus of Nazareth said to you way back when,
‘Come out!’ Come out and be who you are going to be!

Amen

Today's Jewish Testament reading comes from Ezekiel 37:1-14 and describes a vision of renewal during a time of disillusionment and despair. The Babylonians had conquered Judah and destroyed the Temple when Ezekiel shared this message of hope for God's people.

37:1 The hand of the Lord came upon me,
and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord
and set me down in the middle of a valley;
it was full of bones.
2He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley,
and they were very dry.
3He said to me,
'Mortal, can these bones live?'
I answered,
'O Lord God, you know.'
4Then he said to me,
'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them:
O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.
5Thus says the Lord God to these bones:
I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
6I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin, and put breath in you,
and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'
7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded;
and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling,
and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
8I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them,
and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.
9Then he said to me,
'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:
Thus says the Lord God:
Come from the four winds, O breath,
and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'
10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them,
and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.
11 Then he said to me,
'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say,
"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely."
12Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God:
I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people;
and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people.
14I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,
and I will place you on your own soil;
then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'

11:1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,* 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus* was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' 8The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' 9Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' 11After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' 12The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' 16Thomas, who was called the Twin,* said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus* had already been in the tomb for four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles* away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' 23Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' 25Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.* Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,* the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said,

‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews 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, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’ ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place* and our nation.’ ⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵²and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. ⁵³So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

⁵⁴ Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.

⁵⁵ Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. ⁵⁶They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, ‘What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?’ ⁵⁷Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus* was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

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 THE 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.

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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...
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!”

[SO,] FROM THEN ON, THEY DELIBERATED
AS TO HOW TO PUT JESUS TO DEATH.

SO, JESUS NO LONGER WENT ABOUT PUBLICLY AMONG THE JUDEANS,
BUT JOURNEYED FROM THERE INTO THE REGION NEAR THE DESERT,
SPEAKING IN THE CITIES OF EPHRAIM.

HE STAYED THERE WITH HIS DISCIPLES.

BUT IT WAS GETTING CLOSER TO THE JEWISH PASSOVER,
AND MANY PEOPLE WERE GOING UP TO JERUSALEM
FROM THE SURROUNDING REGION
TO SPIRITUALLY PREPARE THEMSELVES.

[AND] THOSE AT THE TEMPLE WERE ANXIOUS ABOUT JESUS
AND ASKED WITH MUTUAL CONCERN,
“DON’T YOU THINK ‘HE’ WILL COME TO THE FESTIVAL?”

BUT THE HIGH-PRIESTS AND PHARISEES INSTRUCTED THEM
ABOUT THE PURPOSE, PLACE, AND PREPARATIONS FOR SEIZING JESUS...