

Lent 5A
Peace, Seattle
April 2, 2017
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

RAISING LAZARUS

On paper he's 59, but in reality he's a lot older. On his own by age 16, Ove has had his hand on the plow ever since. And he's been good at it; doing his job the way it ought to be done.¹

But after spending a third of a century in the same workplace, he's joined the ranks of the retired—not by choice—and he has too much time on his hands.

As he knocks around the house and neighborhood he shared with his wife Sonja so many years, we listen to a conversation in which Ove does all the talking. For she who had made him feel alive has been taken from him by cancer. Now, all that's left of him is a bitter, cantankerous shell. And all he longs for is to crawl in the grave with her.

To move that plan along, Ove's determined to hasten his own demise. The problem is, each carefully conceived plan to force death to take him fails.

But there's more to the story of A Man Called Ove than this. As the chapters unfold we gradually learn how Ove came to be who he is; and we watch as the needs of neighbors and an orphaned cat find their way into his stone cold heart.

- A pregnant immigrant, her young daughters and hapless husband;
- A former student of his wife, adrift in the world;
- His Alzheimer's—afflicted neighbor;
- And a cat who will not die...

From this odd collection of ne'er-do-wells and misfits a genuine community of caring arises. And Ove learns that life still has gifts to bestow. And so we watch as, in spite of himself, Ove is brought back from the edge of the grave.

MORTAL, said the Lord, CAN THESE BONES LIVE? And I answered, O LORD GOD, YOU KNOW.

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."

PROPHECY TO THEM: THUS SAYS THE LORD GOD: I AM GOING TO OPEN YOUR GRAVES, O MY PEOPLE...AND YOU SHALL KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD. FOR I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, AND YOU SHALL LIVE.

Our texts this morning speak of our longing for life—on this side of the grave and beyond it. And God's longing, too, not to stand aloof beyond the fray, but to enter into it—all of it—with us; calling us forth from death to life.

We know the setting in John well enough: Jesus is approaching his HOUR, the HOUR he's been moving toward since his public ministry began. Conflicts with the Judean religion police have reached the point where he's narrowly avoided being stoned. The lines are drawn. The end game approaches.

¹ Illustration based the book by Fredrick Backman, *A Man Called Ove*. English translation by Henning Koch (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

Now he's been called by his friends Martha and Mary to return to Judea, to come to the aid of their brother Lazarus, who is gravely ill.

Jesus delays, and by the time he gets there, Lazarus has been dead four days.

As he arrives, Martha meets him, her voice a mixture of anguish and possibility:

LORD, IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.

BUT EVEN NOW I KNOW THAT GOD WILL GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU ASK OF HIM.

YOUR BROTHER WILL RISE AGAIN, Jesus tells her.

I KNOW HE WILL RISE AGAIN IN THE RESURRECTION ON THE LAST DAY, she says.

But Jesus corrects her. I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. THOSE WHO TRUST IN ME, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIE, WILL LIVE, AND EVERYONE WHO LIVES AND TRUSTS IN ME WILL NEVER DIE. DO YOU TRUST THIS?²

Jesus does not say he has power to give resurrection and life. He says HE IS those things; that in his presence they become present reality, because he is one with the Source of Life—the Great I AM.³

Some times, perhaps most times, this claim Jesus makes seems too good or too outlandish to be true. And it might have seemed that way for Martha and Mary, too. So Jesus then goes to show them what he means.

He fills his lungs...and the breath from his mouth—like the four winds called forth by Ezekiel—POWERS it's way through to the stone cold tomb, STIRS the clothe bindings which wind around his friend, Lazarus, and FILLS his lungs with new life. LAZARUS! COME OUT!

We could spend a long time discussing the physiologic impossibilities of the story.

But to do so would be to miss the point, which is this: In Jesus, even death itself, the last and greatest boundary, is upended.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE means that this way of trusting to which we are called isn't about receiving a coupon for eternal life which we will one day, after death, redeem. It's about receiving the permission—no the command—to live the resurrection TODAY, RIGHT HERE...

To feel its power animating our lives; to breathe it in, claiming it as God's gift through Christ now; a gift that makes all the difference in how we love, whom we love, how far we love.

CHRIST BREATHEs, and we live.

CHRIST BREATHEs, and the disjointed bones of our lives snap into place.

CHRIST BREATHEs, and Lazarus walks.

And as he walks, Jesus tells his friends: UNBIND HIM, AND LET HIM GO.

There it is...our job description. UNBIND HIM, UNBIND HER, UNBIND THEM, AND LET THEM GO.

Last night I went to a screening of the film 13th, a searing documentary that traces our country's system of mass incarceration of people of color to its roots in the culture of slavery.⁴

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Dress Rehearsal*, from *God in Pain*, Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 68. I take BBT's suggestion to translate πιστευων.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Film by Ava DuVernay <http://www.avaduvernay.com/13th/>

The film's title, 13th, refers to the 13th Amendment of the Constitution, which forbids the enslavement of anyone—except those who have committed a crime. Over the last five decades the US prison population has grown from under 200,000 to over 2 million—a tenfold increase; the highest rate in the world—and a disproportionate number of them are black.

One of every three black men in this country will spend a portion of their lives in prison. And scores of corporate entities are profiting from that reality.

Deep and pervasive historical and cultural layers and precedents have woven an impenetrable web of injustice designed to keep Lazarus bound in his tomb.

The need to change this status quo is undeniable and, at the same time appears insurmountable.

This film has me thinking about another lens we ought to use when taking in this Lazarus text: Jesus did his part. He did what no one else could do—he breathed new life into his friend. But he called on Lazarus' community of friends to take it from there: to work to unravel the layer upon layer upon layer of cloth that marked Lazarus as death's prisoner; to unbind him and let him go.

How long would Lazarus—his life revived—have lasted without a community to surround him and set him free from those bonds? The answer is: Not long! Not long.

The epilogue of this story is that the revived Lazarus and He who raised him are now far too much of a threat to the status quo. And so raising Lazarus becomes the very act that seals Jesus' own fate.

If any shadow of doubt still existed among those who sought to undo Jesus as to whether his death was necessary, those doubts have now vanished. Jesus must die. And he does...

He breathes his last, and in that final exhaling all the systems we have created to control or appease or define or manipulate God—and to foreclose on his disciple community—all of them collapse utterly. **"It...is...finished."**

And then, O MERCY! GOD BREATHES ONCE MORE!