

ARISE
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April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me and set me down in the middle of a valley full of dry bones. "Look, O mortal, can these bones live?" I answered: "O Lord, only you know."

John 11:1-45

Jesus stood before the tomb and cried out, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out with hands and feet bound by strips of cloth. Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."

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The lessons this morning begin with bad news—a valley of dry bones and a dead man in a tomb. We'll get to the "arise and live" part but first we must face some bad news of our own.

Much of the news these days is disheartening. It seems our nation has become a nation of dry bones—bones but no heart.

Public schools, the arts and humanities, scientific research, the soft power of diplomacy, and aid to the poor are threatened with budget cuts. Meanwhile the most powerful military machine the world has ever seen—greater than the next seven nations combined—keeps growing and expanding its global footprint. Politicians are afraid to say "no" lest they be seen as soft on defense.

The threat from terrorists and illegal immigrants is intentionally and cynically exaggerated so as to keep people in fear and to justify boosting military and policing powers to alarming levels even though the chances of death from diabetes, excessive weight, drug overdose, and suicide are far, far greater.

But that news doesn't sell newspapers or bring eyeballs to the television. So certain news outlets continually fuel fear and more fear.

It seems we have a pathological fixation with terrorist attacks and an indifference to the things that really threaten the health and wellbeing of our nation. We glorify the military and the military uniform as the most sacred artifact in our society and give little or no adulation or resources to the truly brave men and women who teach our children in public schools or the brave and devoted scientists who spend endless hours searching for remedies to diseases and global warming.

It seems our nation is full of dry bones—bones but no heart. It's disheartening.

Yes, much of the news is disheartening. But other news is not. The other news is quite heartening but it's seldom reported or heard.

For that past 10,000 years or so—famine, disease, poverty and war—have been humanity's greatest threats. But in the past century those four killers were virtually disarmed—not eliminated but greatly diminished.

It didn't happen by chance or by divine intervention.

After some 10,000 years humans are finally working collaboratively across tribal and national boundaries. Technology and capitalism play a big part. But it also takes a compelling vision, an engaging story, and persistent faith. And I don't mean faith in God per se.

We no longer count on the gods to save us. And with few exceptions, the gods are no longer blamed for earthquakes, famines, and epidemics. That's a big change after 10,000 years.

Scientists now create vaccines, antibiotics and interventions that prevent or mitigate disease and disasters. Smallpox, for example, has been eliminated – not by the gods but by human ingenuity and determination. Whether we like it or not, humanism is slowly replacing theism as the primary human narrative.

As it turns out, humans have the power to create like no other species. We may not be the biggest, fastest or strongest but we have another power – the power of imagination. It's both a blessing and a curse.

Our great ancestors noticed. They didn't need a revelation from beyond to tell them. They could see with their own eyes that humans were fascinating and terrifying creatures, or as they poetically put it in Genesis: *made in the image and likeness of God*.

In one of their folktales our great ancestors portrayed the human one reaching beyond the limitations of other animals, reaching for immortality. Eve, symbolizing the mother of humankind, reached for the forbidden fruit of knowledge. Unlike other animals our reach exceeds our grasp. Not even the gods can stop us.

Yes, we have great potential for good but it's not guaranteed. Fear and greed still get the best of us.

We still wall ourselves off into tribes and threaten each other. You can see it in the great partisan divide in our nation. Protestant parents once forbade their children to marry a Catholic. Now Democratic parents cringe if their child dates a Republican. Tribalism is still our default posture.

But our ancestors also glimpsed something else in the human species. You can hear it in the story of Abraham and Sarah. A voice in their heart awakened and cried out: *Arise. Arise from your complacency. Leave your tribe and kindred behind and build a new kind of city, a new kind of community – a community of universal kinship where all shall be blessed, safe and secure*.

Abraham and Sarah chose to walk that way. And so can we. It's not an easy way. The terrain is often treacherous.

As it turns out, the power that makes us distinct from other animals isn't so much opposable thumbs, or language, or even some immortal soul. The trait that makes us distinct, as Yuval Harari, professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, claims in his new book, *Homo Deus: A History of Tomorrow* – the trait that makes humans distinct is our ability to collaborate and connect through vast networks of communications.

And so we connect and reconnect. We build and rebuild. We don't quit. We keep reaching.

We see a valley of dry bones or Lazarus bound in a tomb and refuse to resign to despair. We call Lazarus and all that represents out of tombs of despair and closets of fear. No, we don't have a single, magical "word" to revive dry bones or corpses. But we do have powers to revive, heal and liberate those bound by chains of poverty, shame and stigma.

We keep crying out: *Lazarus, come forth.*

The power we see in Jesus is not solely about the historic Jesus of Nazareth. In our tradition Jesus represents something far greater, something even humanism can't put its finger on.

The gospel is a revelation, or we might say, a discovery of the "Cosmic Christ" present before time in all of creation including humanity. It's the power to bring light out of darkness, life out of death, prosperity out of poverty, freedom out of bondage, peace out of war, and hope out of despair.

And so Sunday after Sunday we encourage each other to keep building that city, that community of universal kinship. *Arise. Arise from your sleep. Arise from despair. Behold! A new day is dawning.* And it's not just human; it's absolutely divine.

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Hymn
"City of God"