

Sermon, March 26, 2023
The Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

In the early part of 2019, I took a group of incoming seminarians to Sunday service at the National Cathedral. It was an ordinary Sunday, a routine crowd, and a guest preacher, long-time political columnist Michael Gerson. Reading his biography in the bulletin, I didn't quite know what to suspect. But I can tell you, I did not suspect anything close to what I heard. Michael Gerson, who died from cancer late last year, preached a sermon on his struggle with depression – connecting it to a rather universal experience many of us have when trying to cope with the sorrow of the world. This sermon, later published as a column in *The Washington Post*, was, simply, remarkable.¹

I return to it frequently, when I find myself wishing I could find some impossible strength, when I look around me and all I see is a desolate valley of bones – so dry, so old, that it is clear the rainfall of hope had not fallen in a long while. This sermon was given before the pandemic, and oh how prophetic Michael's words were for us. "We are afraid of the mortality that is knit into our bones," he writes. "We experience unearned suffering, or give unreturned love, or cry useless tears. And many of us eventually grow weary of ourselves – tired of our own sour company."

It has been three years since we went into lockdown, blundering our way through an unknown territory, optimistically believing that our summer vacations and weddings and plans would be able to occur once the worst was over. But the worst never ended, did it? Each week, hundreds of thousands of people died from a virus we hadn't even heard of. Then it was a half a million, then a million, then we soared past a million. While the vaccine felt like a moment of actual transcendent victory, we are still dealing with the consequences of this like long-COVID, courses of vaccines, and the slow-unfolding consequences of loneliness and social isolation. There are moments when lines are drawn in the sand of time: before and after. March of 2020 is itself a very pronounced line.

Perhaps you have lines in your own life, when there is a very clear "before" and "after." It could be a major diagnosis, loss, injustice, a big move, something you saw and can't unsee. I like to think that we are watching another line being drawn in our Gospel text, and I wonder what it might hold for

¹ <https://cathedral.org/sermons/michael-gerson/>

us today, three years into a global pandemic. The story of Lazarus's death is something that we can think of as one of those moments with a clear before and a clear after.

Jesus approached a community in the tender time of grief and did something that not even his most devout followers could have imagined. Before, Jesus performed numerous signs and miracles, attracting hostile attention, building and building; turning water to wine, divining the future of a Samaritan woman, and restoring sight to the blind. And after, here was Lazarus, alive – living and breathing proof of Jesus's identity as the Word made flesh. In John's narrative, Jesus's raising of Lazarus is the event that prompted a meeting of the authorities, resulting in a warrant for his arrest. After Lazarus walks out of the tomb, we begin our journey to the cross. This is what changes the trajectory – foreshadowing both the grief of the crucifixion and the amazement of the resurrection.

And that's what we have seen again and again and again in the world and in our lives. Just as tragedy can draw a line in the sand, God's refusal to leave us to languish in those dark valleys can also draw lines in time. Beautiful things define our lives, too. I believe that this is the most important thing we can testify to the world. The world sorely needs people who believe, and know, that though weeping may endure the night, joy comes in the morning. We are like watchmen waiting for the morning, like watchmen waiting for the morning.

It has been three years since entering this bizarre and tragic time in our world. We have all learned a lot, experienced a lot, and we are different than we were before. And yet, one thing remains.

As people of faith, we believe, stubbornly, that Jesus is the way, the truth, the resurrection, the life. Where God goes, life goes too. Even there, even here. Even in a world where there is unkindness, injustice, prejudice, disease, death, even there. Mortal, can these bones live? *These* bones? Even the most broken, the most crumbled ones? The ones of six construction workers killed in a freak accident near Baltimore last Wednesday? The ones of my friend Ryan who died at 27 and whose own mother had to read his eulogy last week? The 25 victims of vicious tornadoes in Mississippi? The ones suffering from an aggressive virus, their loved ones saying goodbye on FaceTime? The ones that live in the bodies of people who suffer in despair, believing that death would be a most-hoped-for blessing? Yes, even these. "Oh, Lord God, you know."

Ezekiel's vision in the valley and Lazarus's journey from life to death to life again are both a metaphor and a promise. In the same way that God created humanity from the dust and breathed the breath of life into us, God will never find anyone or anything too broken for life to break through. We don't know this because we, as Christians, are given some special ability to avoid pain, to live above grief and tragedy. We know, because that even in the middle of the worst, God moves around us and in us and through us if only we have the eyes to see even in the days "after." Perhaps a good hymn, a child's laughter, petting the dog, running through the cherry blossoms. Even something as simple as a beautiful sunrise or sunset can reveal the hand of God, giving life. Our testimony to this is, simply, world changing.

Michael Gerson marveled at this phenomenon, too. There are so many experiences he remembers as clear lines in the sand of his life that were evidence of God's love and goodness. It reminded him of Lazarus. He ended his sermon with a poetic reference, saying "We are Lazarus, and we live."²

We live, though we stare at a valley of bones. We live despite *being* those bones. We are Lazarus and we live.

² G.K. Chesterton, "The Convert."