

“Seeing The Difference Jesus Makes”
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-27

In a recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* based on a 2002 The Barna Group study, a group of Americans were surveyed concerning issues of life after death: “Ten percent believe we return to earth in a different form. Ten percent believe there is no life after death. Twenty-four percent believe the soul lives in a different place, determined by past actions. Forty-eight percent believe we go to heaven or hell, depending on confession of sins and accepting Jesus. The remaining 8 percent were undecided.”¹ As the death toll worldwide mounts due to Coronavirus (COVID-19), many are reflecting on the meaning of death.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a pandemic. California is under a “Shelter In Place” Order and 24 other states have joined us. We have been asked to sacrifice for the benefit of the common good. As of 6:15am this morning, worldwide there are 683,502 cases, 32,139 deaths and 146,396 who have recovered.² Precaution and proactive hygiene are imperative. Sheltering in place and practicing social distancing will prove to be lifesaving and a return to a more normal way of existence sooner than later.

As the anxiety increases around the meaning of death, the religious have a significant contribution to make, particularly Christians. Through our interactions with family and friends as well as in social media, we can engage the conversation in helpful ways. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, writes this about engaging others and their religious tradition,

Based on the young people I know best, more and more of them identify as spiritual but not religious because it is easier than trying to reconcile the teachings of their faith with

¹Adapted by Ted DeHass, Bedford, Iowa from Jim Holt, “Eternity for Atheists,” *The New York Times Magazine* (7-29-07) and The Barna Group, 2002

²Stats taken from the Worldometer an organization run by an international team of developers, researchers, and volunteers with the goal of making world statistics available in a thought-provoking and time relevant format to a wide audience around the world. Worldometer is owned by Dadax, an independent company. Worldometer has no political, governmental, or corporate affiliation.

their affection for their non-Christian friends. According to other teachings they have received in church, their friends are not all right the way they are. Unless they become Christian, God will not allow them to enter heaven. Instead they will roast in hell for all eternity for refusing to accept Jesus as their Lord. This does not make any more sense to some young people than the teaching that they must choose between the account of creation in the Bible and the one their biology teacher has laid out for them.³

Unfortunately, we are seeing this kind of religious exclusivism playing out in the Coronavirus pandemic. Some Christian leaders believe and have said that this virus is God's judgment on the unrighteous. When answering the question posed by Fox News chief religious correspondent Lauren Green, is the Coronavirus "God's judgment on a sinful and corrupt world?" Pastor Timothy Keller responded, "Yes and No... It's just a way, I do think, for God to try to wake us up and to say, please make sure you're right with me, Keller explained. Please think, think about, you know, where you are. So, there's a sense in which all these kinds of disasters are a judgment, but a judgment that's not on the people who are suffering."⁴ Ouch! Those suffering do not hear this the way Keller intended. I understand where Keller is coming from, but it may not be helpful in the religious discussion that is going on right now about death.

The texts in Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-27 reveal that death can be viewed as an end or a beginning, literally and figuratively.

In Ezekiel 37:1-14, the people of Israel had been in exile so long they behaved as if they were dead. Where was there God? They believed God had abandoned them. They had lost all vision and hope as a people. The people of God were anxious and in deep despair. But through the prophet Ezekiel, God told the people,

...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. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I 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...⁵

³Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 63.

⁴Published March 13 on FoxNews.com.

⁵Ezekiel 37:12-14

God promised to bring them back from the dead, if you will, personally and as a community.

In John 11:1-27, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was ill, and they sent word to Jesus to come. Jesus sent word back that Lazarus' illness would lead to testimony of God's glory. Something would occur through Lazarus' illness and eventual death that was bigger than life. Jesus did not come immediately. He stayed two days longer where he was before he and his disciples returned to Judea. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. What ensues is a discussion about life between Jesus, Mary, Martha, the friends that had gathered and the disciples. Yes, Jesus resuscitated Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus lived to die another day. There is a deeper lesson, however. Yes, it is a harbinger of Jesus' resurrection yet to come. More profoundly, it is a lesson about compassion, authenticity and vulnerability pointed toward the brokenness of the human spirit. The human spirit can be resuscitated today, brought back from the dead, in and through a believing faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to Martha and to us today, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"⁶ This is a profound word for us, particularly in complacency or panic when it comes to living life fully and abundantly despite circumstances that may provoke despair, chaos, sadness and hate.⁷

Today is The Fifth Sunday in Lent. Through authentic self-reflection, we're not to be intimidated or threatened by circumstances that communicate death or the teachings of various religious traditions. We belong to God and one another. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of *Holy Envy* writes, "I believe that increasing numbers of young Christians are coming to grips with pluralism—embracing it, even—though they are getting very little help from their elders as they

⁶John 11:25-26

⁷In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Rebecca Abts Wright, Jane Anne Ferguson, Andrew Nagy-Benson and Michael L. Lindvall as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 93-95, 95-96, 104-106 and 106-108.

think through what it means to be a person of faith in community with people of other (and no) faiths.”⁸ Like Mary and Martha consider the literal and figurative meanings of death.

Receive hope, peace, joy and love during this Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Allow God to bring new life to your dry bones and withered spirit. God has not abandoned you. God is with you. We know these things through a believing faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God has a warm relationship with you. God loves you and wants you to love others with that same warmth. Remember, a warm relationship is characterized by being empathetic, listening, caring, loving, acting and speaking with compassion.

Be resuscitated by Jesus. Exude hope, peace, joy and love in times when despair, chaos, sadness and hate take hold on human experience. Be authentic like Mary and Martha. Listen to Jesus. Experience Jesus. Show people Jesus. Amen.

This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 29 March 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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⁸Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 67.