

In God's Time

March 13, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130 and John 11:1-45

One of my favorite cartoon strips is Bloom County by Berkeley Breathed. This past week, I was reminded of a particular strip. It is "Show and Tell" Day at School and the little genius Oliver is explaining to the class in incredible detail with drawings and mathematical equations how his understanding of gravity and astronomy added to a telescope sighting the night before proves a meteor will destroy the earth in ten days. The last panel shows a sad Milo Bloom holding his pregnant hamster by the tail telling the class: "I *was* going to tell you my hamster is having babies in two weeks but I guess that is now moot."

Oliver, who had an enormous poster of Einstein on his bedroom wall, had mathematical explanations for everything. In another strip, Oliver says: "Quantum mechanics and relativity reconciled! Everything in the universe can be explained! The big bang! Galaxies! Earth! People! Trees!"

I thought of Oliver this past Tuesday while Sally and I watched a segment of Nova on WXXI. "The Elegant Universe: Einstein's Dream," took us from Newton's thoughts on gravity born of observing a falling apple through and beyond the theses of Albert Einstein to an explanation of string theory. I did not know Einstein debunked the theories of Newton only to have his ideas completely reworked by the theories of others. Sally sat on the couch nodding, adding commentary about which scientist had said what about each subject. I think Milo Bloom would have joined me in getting lost at the point Newton's now famous apple was on the ground. Despite the producers of WXXI claiming the program explained string theory in simple language, I was "lost" for most of the hour. Milo Bloom and Ralph English and the like are happy knowing the earth keeps going around the sun. We don't need to know why! We really don't need to understand how time and space are relative. To us, time is linear and reality is dictated by what we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell.

Oliver, Einstein and *their* ilk would love the Gospel of John. Matthew's Gospel is grounded in how Jesus fulfilled past prophecies. Mark spoke to his present, to the realities the first century church faced. (Mark is Milo's and Ralph's Gospel.) Luke's Gospel and his second work, the Acts of the Apostles, were shaped by Christ's visions for the future. The Gospel of John presents little sense of real time and place. The Gospel of John doesn't map out Jesus' ministry in sequence. The Gospel of John gives us the big picture, the *really* big picture, to see Christ in the context of God's grand scheme for humanity, and to hear timeless and timely words about God's understanding of time, death, life, grace, hope and peace, ideas that stand in sharp contrast to the enduring ways of humanity.

Let's look at God's sense of time and reality. In God's realm, human inclinations, suppositions, beliefs, and visions are turned upside down. Dry bones, dry, dusty, deader than the proverbial door nail bones, can gain sinew and flesh and skin and breathe so that there is life and vitality again. In similar fashion, we read that Lazarus was dead. He was buried. That was a human

reality. Resuscitation, a reversal of reality, was, from a human perspective, not in the offing anymore than a valley of dry bones gaining life as shown to Ezekiel five hundred years before. Indeed, Martha suggested the body of her brother, Lazarus, would have decomposed. The translation we read today referred to a potential “odor.” The King James Version uses the somewhat silly sounding yet *profound* word “stinketh.” Let us not assume that a dead person, not comatose, not “dead” for a few moments, but dead-for-four-days person – let us not assume that a dead person coming back from the grave was a normal phenomenon for persons who lived two millennia ago. I think we fall into the unfortunate trap of thinking that Jesus’ miracles, while spectacular, had become commonplace or ho-hum for the people of Judea in His day.

The story of Lazarus’ death and resuscitation, taken in conjunction with the wonderful vision from Ezekiel of the “dry bones” coming back to life suggests we look hard at God’s sense of time and reality. Sometimes, I wrestle with Jesus’ delay getting to Bethany. What was He thinking? Lazarus was ill! Jesus knew Lazarus was dying and yet He, for lack of a better word, dilly-dallied *for two days!* A proper understanding of Jesus’ miracles is that in every instance the miraculous event is not as significant as deeper theological meanings *to which the circumstances point*. For example, turning water into wine so the best wine was served last may have pleased (if not confused) wedding guests in Cana. However, in that act, Jesus related that he, the “new wine,” was the fulfillment of God’s promises, the old covenant, the “old wine.” Likewise, Lazarus’ death and resuscitation pointed to an even *greater* event, the resurrection of our LORD. As significantly, Jesus’ reaction to Martha and Mary’s frustration and grief, the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept,” points to the empathy and presence of Christ in our lives whenever we grieve and whenever we lose something of significance.

Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones reminded God’s people exiled in Babylon that they would know a restoration of their faith. Cut off from their destroyed temple and ruined Jerusalem, they felt as though their faith was dried up, that they were lost, that they no longer had reason to hope. The vision of the valley of dry bones is a significant message for anyone *who for any reason* might feel as though their souls are dried up, that they are devoid of joy, that they are robbed of vitality, or feel they no longer have any good reason to live. When all seems lost from and in our perceptions of time and reality, God’s wonderful visions and promises come to us, shake us at the very roots of our being and compel us to look beyond our human perspectives to the ways and truths of our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God. In this Season of Lent, in the invitation to be a people of clean hearts and faithful discipleship, we are challenged to embrace God’s sense of time and reality as it stands in such sharp contrast to that of humans.

In our current *human* time, our culture nurtures, perhaps glorifies, violence and conflict. Once again, we live in a world that suggests might makes right – forgetting that right alone makes right! In contrast, in *God’s* time, the embrace of violence and conflict is replaced with a call to composed but deliberate dialogue and the pursuit of peaceful resolutions, not ignoring the real differences among peoples but accomplishing reconciliation through grace and hope!

In our current *human* time, arrogance holds sway – in the way we drive our cars and our lives like maniacs, the way we consume the earth’s resources as though the supply is endless, the way we strut strength and might. In contrast, in *God’s* time, self-importance is replaced with humility and gentleness. This is not a call to forget one’s own self-worth and value, but we are challenged to not put our own, often selfish, needs ahead of all else – including that of other family members, one’s community, the rest of humanity and the community of God, the church!

In our current *human* time, people hold as sacred, if not as sacramental, success defined as more and more possessions, a feeding frenzy of consumption, and a yearning for more and yet even more political and economic and personal clout and influence – to the point that each of us is competing to have *our* own way. In contrast, in *God's* time, the Sacraments are about faith and community, nurture and care for the most vulnerable, the promise that we, yes *we* will speak of God's time and God's visions to those we baptize in the faith and that *we* will share God's goodness and God's call to sacrifice and service when we gather around a table graced with bread and cup and remember that the single most changing and challenging event of all human history came about not with a display of military might or regal power or claim to the world's riches, but in the humble and giving sacrifice of our LORD – blessed at a table like this one [point to the table] but accomplished on an instrument of torture like that one [point to the cross].

In our current *human* time, we are “treated” to words like those of Marine Lieutenant General James Mattis who last month in a public forum said this about the Afghans,

Actually it's quite fun to fight them, ... It's a hell of a hoot, ... It's fun to shoot some people. ... You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn't wear a veil. You know, guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them.

Marine Commandant, General Michael Hagee, counseled Mattis about those remarks. Mattis agrees he should have chosen his words more carefully.

Fortunately, most military people, both active and retired, embrace the words of General of the Armies and then President Dwight D. Eisenhower who said:

I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.

In *God's* time, we will no longer practice the art of war and dissension. We have a long way to go, but in *God's* time, that which is brutal, futile and stupid will “go the way of all dust.”

Am I dreaming? Just think of some basic human rights we now take for granted for which so many persons struggled in their *human* time. In all too many instances, in *God's* time, others came to enjoy the fruits of their labor long after they were gone.

- Think of Martin Luther King, Jr. who did not live to see the progress for which he was so instrumental in the area of civil rights! While there is still much work to be done, the legally sanctioned racial segregation of the 1950's and 1960's now seems like ancient history. Thank God for what occurs in *God's* time!
- Think of all the women who could have served so ably as ordained ministers before Antoinette Brown was ordained in Rochester nearly one hundred and fifty years ago! But let us not forget that although the Henrietta congregation was willing to ordain her in their church, they asked that she *serve* elsewhere! She did so, very ably, in the town of Savannah east of here. While a “glass ceiling” for women still exists in some circles, we can celebrate much progress. Oh, how we look forward to Trina Ward's ordination in this sanctuary in the near future! Thank God for what occurs in *God's* time!

- Think of the contributions to the body politic had women been able to vote before suffrage finally won out in 1920! The thought of a woman serving as President of the United States drives a few people crazy, but I believe it will occur in my lifetime. If it is the right person at the right time for the right reasons, then thank God for what occurs in God's time!

Finally, a call to know and embrace God's time and reality is a summons to humility, patience and *surrender*. The God Who showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones that lived again, the God Who through Jesus' raising Lazarus showed Martha and Mary the promise of the resurrection, the God of all time Who invites each and every one of us to reconciliation and grace, the God of history Who moves, challenges and shapes who we might be as people of grace and hope and faith invites us to truly know how much is possible in God's time and God's reality.

Some of the words of Psalm 130 read today serve as an amen, as verse to our waiting, yearning and searching to reach beyond mere human perceptions to those of our God:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I hope; my soul waits for the LORD more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with Him is great power to redeem! [Psalm 130:5-7]

Amen.