

öEternal Life, Now!ö
Ezekiel 37: 1 ö 14 John 11: 1 ö 45
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The stories we have heard today are traditionally used to demonstrate the power of God to make all things right and to demonstrate the power of Jesus over death in a way that leads to eternal life. This is a central feature to much of practiced Christianity, but it is also a stumbling block to those of us who subscribe to a more theologically liberal view of Christianity. What I find disturbing in these accounts and in that more traditional theology concerns the struggle I have with the functioning of supernatural forces.

Another way to say this is that we must be clear about how we see God behaving in relationship with creation. A superficial reading of these scriptural accounts leads us to conclude that God possesses magical power, and that Holy people have a God-given license to dispense that magic. The other possible theological implication of these stories could be that we are, by means of our fallen state, separated from the power of God and the eternal life associated with the timeless God. Both of these function in some people's understanding as tempting, but dangerous beliefs.

Let me explain what I mean. If we believe that we are, for whatever reason, cut off from the benefits of life, then our task, of course, must be to find the key to being restored to favor. When people carry such a belief, it is natural for them to reduce the scope of their religious life to a superficial morality. Do the right things (or have the right advocate) and then God (of Jesus) uses magical power to restore you to eternal life with God, or do the wrong things (or have an inadequate advocate) and you that same magical power either will be removed from you or it will be used to condemn you forever. I, for one, do not believe in divine magic.

While obedience and morality may have their place, it seems to me that relationship with God entails so much more than that. Beyond simple obedience and beyond the moralistic methods to achieve divine favor, relationship with God includes learning, growth, healing, creativity, purpose, and belonging, to name a few possible characteristics.

The Biblical stories can help us look beyond what might be our narrow and somewhat pessimistic views of life. All of us have experienced deep disappointment or loss in our lives, perhaps some more than others. At different points in our lives, we inevitably experience something like the dryness of the bones in the dessert or we can feel like we are entombed in our troubles. It helps to know that the powers of life go beyond our immediate vision. It helps to know that there are voices calling to us, inviting us to öCome out!ö of our desiccated lives or out of our living death.

When we respond to the call and emerge from the darkness, we come to realize that there are potential meanings and purposes in life that transcend what we knew before. The öbonesö of our lives are knit together and animated, and we shrug off the burial cloths and rejoin life. By the way, returning to life is not the same as ögetting overö the loss. All losses affect us and we are inevitably and unavoidably changed by them.

Still, we have the capacity to affirm that the life giving and life supporting power of the eternal God, whatever we mean by that term, is also eternal. The narrow view of eternal life that most of us were taught earlier in our lives locates it hopefully "in heaven", but certainly after this present life is over. As far as I am concerned, such a belief diminishes the importance of human existence, reducing it to merely a test that we must pass successfully in order to graduate to the life to come. Again, there is some value in seeing some moments in life as opportunities to prepare for other, more difficult, moments. But in order to give appropriate value to human existence, it becomes necessary to see these "tests" as belonging to the process of growth and development.

The experience of salvation is not a rain-check that we redeem at death. The experience of salvation constitutes full admission to eternal life, now! Parenthetically, salvation is not precisely the same thing as being magically rescued from the "bonds of our sinfulness." I have spent many years struggling with the meaning of that word. What does it mean to be saved, and what are we saved from, or for? It has helped me to discover that the word and the concept come from the same root meaning as healing or coming to wholeness. Our wholeness involves a profound connection with all of life and that connection cannot be removed by means of loss or pain or bad behavior, no matter how severe.

But for now, I want to address the human tendency to overvalue the future at the expense of the present. Many people spend their lives waiting for the next thing to happen. It goes something like this: "Life will be good as soon as I finish school." "Life will be better as soon as I get married, or get the new job, or get divorced, or get remarried, or attain a particular age, or finish my current project, etc., etc." With this philosophy about life, it makes sense that Eternal life would be pushed out into the future also. If we do that, we are then left with the sentiment that life can only be truly satisfying after we die. How often have you heard people say that a deceased person is now "in a better place"? Such attitudes keep us from accepting and valuing life as it is.

Again, I find myself thinking about my years as a prison chaplain. One day a man came into my office with a question. As a young man he had been quite a law-breaker, but as he grew older, his natural wisdom and his hard work around his spirituality and in the AA program his was making significant progress. He wanted to know what to do next. My suggestion to him was that he befriend the "wall." He got quite upset at me saying, "I hate that wall. I won't ever like being behind it!" I told him that my suggestion had nothing to do with liking being in prison. It had to do with understanding the function of the wall and understanding that unless he came to terms with it, the wall would continue to torment him when he was released. I was thinking that some of the most difficult human prisons reside in the mind.

If we think about this life as something that we simply must endure in order to get to "a better place", then we miss a tremendous opportunity to be fully alive. As we follow Jesus healing ministry, we notice that he does not point people into the future. This is not a "pie in the sky, by and by" gospel message. Jesus heals people so they can participate fully in life! Now!

Eternal life is not something to worry about because you already have it. It has already begun. In fact, it is eternal in both directions. You have always been immersed in Eternal Life.

Let's talk about this concept in terms of the life and struggles of this congregation. Every congregation gets caught up in considerations about its survival. If you ask almost anyone what their vision for the church is, there is a good chance you will hear something like "We need to attract more youth!" While that may be a very good idea, let's ask ourselves why. Most likely people want more youth in the church so it can survive. I remember the first time I came across the "700 Club" while channel surfing. (That was back in the days when I still watched broadcast TV.) Here was a kind of telethon. I watched for a while to see what cause they were raising money for. Finally, I concluded that the cause was simply to stay on the air "to survive." Is that what we are about, too. Is it merely to survive?

What about the meaning of Jesus' raising of Lazarus? Was he merely demonstrating that people could continue to survive, either in this world, or in the next, if they only followed him? I hope (and believe) that his message was much more significant than that. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about staying alive; it is about the quality of living. Many people find themselves entombed "in work, in prejudgments, in unhealthy relationships, in addictions, in poverty. The gospels tell us that those materialistic factors can never give us the satisfaction we crave. And while we may minister to people who suffer from oppression, simple freedom from oppression is not what makes the church important. How we live, how we care, how we matter to one another, how we support one another's creativity "those are the factors that make us who we are.

So if you think the church is in peril of entombment; if you think that the church is stuck in an anxiety-driven survival mode, then hear the call of your Christ who invites you to come out and live. Whatever happens beyond, you are invited fully in the present and let eternity take care of itself.