

Ya, Denial!

March 29, 2020

There are some musical moments that stay with you, right? I'm sure if we were all gathered together each of us could remember one of those vivid performances—whether we experienced them as a musician or as an attendee. Pause for just a minute to remember one of your favorite musical moments—and if you have an opportunity, post it to our live stream.

In the meantime, I have a few to share to set up our inquiry into our texts for today. In 8th grade, our Wilson Jr. High School jazz band played a song called “The Red Baron Rides Again” at the Eau Claire Jazz Festival and it won us first place in our category. I was hooked by the experience of flow in that performance. I literally got goosebumps as we played. And then I remember vividly hearing the amazing virtuoso jazz pianist Oscar Peterson at the Lawrence Memorial Chapel. Every time I hear his music I remember his presence, and thank you, David Hassel, for sharing some of his songs with us here at Union.

But the moment I'm thinking of today wasn't even music I heard live—it was a televised performance by Nirvana on Saturday Night Live, January 11, 1992. The song was “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” and if you don't know it, it was an anthem in the “grunge rock” movement that grew out of the Seattle area in the 1990s. The lead singer of the band, the late Kurt Cobain, had a kind of growl and primal scream that was accompanied by a single guitar, bass, and drums—Nirvana. The song had dramatic contrasts—quiet harmonics during the verse, and then pounding bass, drums and guitar on the chorus. And it's that chorus that I remember, at the end of which Cobain screams, repeatedly, “Ya, Denial! Ya, Denial! Ya, Denial!” I remember turning to Lisa after the Saturday Night live performance and saying—“they are really good.” And they were.

This chorus came to me as we struggle together this Lent to deal with the consequences of pandemic, and as we face the fact that we may have waited too long to act: ya, denial. And it is not at all clear that we have, in fact, awakened to the new reality of our era—the dry bones of social distancing here in the Fox River Valley, the U.S., and around the world. And the particular text I have in mind is verse 11 of Ezekiel 37, which reads: *“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'”* If that verse doesn't resonate with how you've felt at some time or another over the past two weeks or so, then you haven't been paying attention. Those dry bones are all people today, aren't they? *“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely!”*

So I want to ring the changes on three kinds of denial today, as I try to bring a word of comfort, a word of good news, in the midst of despair; to bring a little beauty out of brokenness; to point toward the resurrection that only follows when the seed falls into the ground and dies. So, I'll talk about the denial of death; the denial of grief; and the denial of hope. In each—my intention is to move us beyond denial into honesty, beyond denial into integrity, beyond denial into the loving embrace of our fragility that helps us to forge

solidarity and find flow even in a time of plague. God wants us to live—and live abundantly—even in a time of social distancing.

So, first—the denial of death. Ezekiel was a prophet during the 6th century BCE, who lived through the exile of the people of Israel to Babylon. His book is in two parts. The first part is filled with stories and images trying to awaken people to the threat that was facing them from their own injustice and violence; to warn them that they were heading for a fall. It was, from what we know of history, not a particularly successful prophetic effort. Jerusalem was besieged by Babylon and the people who survived were taken into exile in 597 BCE. The second part of Ezekiel, then, is filled with prophecies consoling the people while they lived as exiles in Babylon. Our first reading for today comes from the 2nd half of the book of Ezekiel—the prophecies of consolation.

But it starts by cutting through the most durable of human psychological protective mechanisms—the denial of death. Most of the time, under normal circumstances, we go through our daily activities unencumbered by awareness of our mortality, and yet according to psychologist Ernest Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1978 for his book *“The Denial of Death,”* our unconscious denial of death is the creative and generative source out of which comes almost all of culture. Most of our contributions to culture—from having children, to going to the grocery store, can be read as an effort to stave off our mortality, and to put us in touch with what another psychologist, Robert Jay Lifton, called symbolic immortality. That is, we deny death in one way or another by attaching ourselves to systems of symbols, notably cultures and religions, that let us live with meaning and purpose in the face of the chaos of unmediated experience.

And most of the time, ordinarily, these systems of death denial work just fine for us. We go on living with that sense of meaning and purpose, knowing unconsciously that we are mortal, finite, and fragile, but tucking that awareness away, burying it, you might say, in the ordinary busy-ness of life.

But then something like an exile to Babylon, or the pandemic of COVID-19 comes along, and there is that stark reality facing us once again, that we affirmed at the beginning of this Lenten season, when things still seemed normal: we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Our bones are dry; we are completely cut off.

And the problem, as Becker sees it, and I think he’s right—is that when we are forced to face our mortality, we don’t always respond charitably. When we’re forced to face our mortality, we tend to find somebody to blame—a scapegoat. In fact, a research team of social scientists at the University of Washington has conducted a series of studies—surveys, clinical trials, experiments with human subjects—in which they raise to the level of awareness in their subjects the fear of death, and then ask them to consider various solutions to problems. And what this research has uncovered is that when we’re confronted with our denial of death; when our fear is surfaced, we’re inclined toward violence; we’ll even kill. In fact, these social scientists have identified in the denial of death precisely the love of violence that has been so much of a plague in human history. We love violence because it gives us a feeling of power in the face of our fragility. We buy guns during a time of pandemic because we think that will calm our terror in the face

of uncertainty. We kill because we're afraid we'll be killed. We blame because we don't want to face our own fragility.

Which is why COVID-19 is in fact an incredible opportunity for us to move beyond the denial of death and the blaming and violence that follows from it, and move into a more humane and loving way of living together that recognizes and builds on our interconnectedness: we are truly all in this together. As Pastor Bridget has put it so well over the past couple of weeks: out of this death God is delivering new life, a new birth, a new way for us all to be together with each other. These dry bones will live. God will breathe new life into us. Jesus will take us beyond the denial of death through his crucifixion into the bright light and greening power of the resurrection.

Just as the people of Israel in exile weren't at all sure what new life looked like, we aren't sure either what's on the other side of this death, either. And yet, unbelievably, this crisis has even motivated the U.S. Congress to work together to fund something other than the military—in the largest single rescue package in history. And that's practically a miracle—call it sinews and muscle and flesh that will help these bones live again.

But we can't jump to the resurrection too quickly; we do have to grieve, don't we? And there are, unfortunately, plenty of so-called leaders who want to push us right past grieving into glory—glory they themselves will claim, of course, without doing the work of attending to the suffering and death right in front of us, looming over us, lurking all around us. They want to deny grief—and yet we all have good reason to be grieving right now.

One way to avoid this temptation to deny grief is to share our stories of loss. This past week during Bible study Pastor Bridget shared the story of her father's passing a few years ago. I won't go there, now, because it's her story to share, when she's ready and able. But I will say that it was an incredibly moving story, and it's important that we hear such stories of mourning because they help us to activate the compassion that tempers our temptation to violence which stems from the denial of death. We grieve to help us prevent killing each other.

Put just a little differently: when we grieve well, we learn to face honestly our *own* fragility.

Obviously, the people to whom Ezekiel was telling the story of the dry bones were people who were grieving. They had lost their land, their homes, their way of life. Like us, living through pandemic, they felt deeply dislocated, desiccated, dried up. They were the dry bones. And so are we.

So, let's grieve this disorientation that we feel; the loss of so much that made things feel normal. It's the irony of our time—isolation saves us, yet we also know that isolation kills. We need each other. We need our collective labor in the economy. We need community.

In our gospel story for today, Jesus doesn't deny grief, but embraces it, demonstrates it, activates it. Yes, he brings Lazarus back from the dead. But first, in the shortest verse in Scripture we learn this simple truth: Jesus wept.

Have you cried this week? I have. It's probably not unique to me that one of the ways that I've sought out solace in the midst of social distancing is by searching out old friends and loved ones on the internet—some of whom I haven't been in touch with for years.

And one of these people I sought out was my old high school girlfriend—her name was Karen (and, yes, my wife Lisa was aware that I was looking her up!) And what I learned was that Karen died on January 27th of this year. I hadn't talked to her in years, and yet when I read her obituary, I cried.

Because, you see, I remember very clearly the first time I noticed Karen our senior year of high school. It was fall, during marching band practice, and she was wearing tan corduroys and a light blue blouse that highlighted her blonde hair and blue eyes. I was stunned in the way that only a teenager can be stunned; if not exactly love at first sight, it was close. So, after asking a friend her name, that night I looked up her family's name in the white pages, called her home, and asked her out to our Fall Homecoming dance. To my surprise, and delight, she said yes, and for the remainder of our senior year we were together almost daily.

During spring, I remember walking her home every afternoon—which meant going more than a mile past my own house and then having to walk that mile back. It didn't matter—I simply loved her company. And I remember one night—I think it must have been a Halloween party—I dressed up as Groucho Marx, complete with a mascara mustache. Without remembering this little detail, Karen and I stopped after the dance in our 1969 Ford Country Squire Station Wagon and, well, to be nice, we kissed. Which meant that when I dropped her off at the Gillard residence, and went in for one of the cookies she offered me that she had baked earlier that day, as we met her father and we all looked at each other in the light we realized that my mustache was now up and down Karen's neck as much as it was on my upper lip. Karen's dad was, fortunately, gracious—and simply smiled, and said “Well, it looks like you kids had a good time.” And then he said “good night.”

And the memories could go on, and on, and on—which is both the joy and the agony of grieving, isn't it? Jesus no doubt shared many memories of his friend Lazarus—those memories may have been behind his tears. For when we grieve, the memories are now done, and yet they feel as near to us as our breath. When we grieve, the story is complete—we face an ending, and yet we yearn for there to be more to. Don't get me wrong—I'm happy with my life and I have an awesome, loving wife, and yet I grieve because there will never be that bittersweet meeting between Karen and me, across the decades and our different destinies, at our 50th High School Reunion. She's dead. And I cried.

This is not a time for Stoicism, sisters and brothers. It is a time to feel. A time to mourn. A time to wonder. A time to grieve. A time to fear. It's all OK. We've all lost a lot. And we will lose much, much more. Eventually, as the poets say, we lose everyone and

everything we love. So, let's not live with the denial of grief. We can grieve. We must grieve. Jesus wept.

And finally, then, let's face the denial of hope—the temptation of despair, what Lutheran theologian Soeren Kierkegaard called “the sickness unto death.”

One of the classes that I taught for many years in Philadelphia, at Temple University, was a course entitled “Death and Dying in the World's Religions.” It was a very popular course, and far from morbid, it actually demonstrated how resilient human beings can be: everywhere, in every tradition, we have created ways to face the absence that death generates, face the void, and move forward with living. This is the deep meaning behind the resurrection of Lazarus: God wants us to live, not to despair.

Surely, the people to whom Ezekiel prophesied were facing despair; and despair is what we are facing today: the sickness unto death; the denial of hope. “Our bones are dried up; we are completely cut off.”

So how are you dealing with that feeling of despair? Where are you finding hope? How are you finding the breath of life that God promises to breathe into these dry bones?

I'm quite certain that at this point many of you could write the rest of this sermon better than I can bring it to a close. And yet, I'll try...

On my morning walks with our dog, Theo, during my meditation time, I'm hearing new bird songs. Most notably, the Canadian geese have returned to our lake. And while I'm not happy with what they are leaving behind in my yard, I am cheered by their gleeful, cacophonous honking—it's spring! How can I despair when these graceful birds come soaring over my home in their V-formation and land so smoothly on the still waters. They restore my soul.

And my daughter Rheanne and I have been planting in our greenhouse and have a nice bunch of seedlings underway. We've planted tomatoes, and peppers, and cucumbers, and beans, and sunflowers, and marigolds, and cilantro and lettuces and arugula, and basil—lots and lots of basil. Growing new life is an antidote to despair. The seed goes into the ground and dies; and new life comes forth. These bones will live.

And two nights ago our son and daughter-in-law, Justin and Genevieve, joined Lisa, Rheanne and me in a Zoom game of Scruples that had us hooting and laughing just like we do when we sit in a circle in our living room. And Wednesday night our closest friends in Philadelphia joined Lisa and me in a Zoomy Cocktail Hour—that lasted almost three. We laughed, argued, consoled, cajoled, and expressed honestly our love for one another in a time that was both salty and sweet. We needed to hear and feel this connection of friendship, now, in this season of plague. It was wonderful.

And then there's music. God's love comes to us in a song, the breath of life, woven into words and wind and carried on waves to our ears. The song of God tells us to turn, turn, turn—to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose, under heaven. The song of God sings to us of an eternity that is breaking in among us right now, this

moment, with this downbeat—with this breath. The song of God is in every song, uniting us in loving relationship with the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all Time.

So take comfort in that song, my sisters and brothers. Hear that music, that breath of life, that comes to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Hear that hope blowing in the spring wind. These bones will live. Amen.

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