

April 10, 2011

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent**

Ezekiel 37:1-14

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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**Remembrance**

The prophet Ezekiel speaks hope to people in exile. They are lost, forlorn, forgotten. And God says through him: "You will be remembered. In every conceivable sense you will be remembered. These dry bones will live, given life by the one who gave life in the first place. You are not forgotten, however deep your despair. You are to be brought up out of death and the Spirit will be breathed into you on the four winds. Because I, Yahweh, remember you, you have life and will yet have life even out of death as a remembered people. In grace you will become who I have created you to be."

This business of salvation being bound up with the fulfillment or completion of creation as we 'become the people we were created to be, people freed from the distortions of sin and all that makes for dry bones in our lives—this business of 'becoming who you are' has to do with our identity. 'Who are your people?' we ask. 'What do you do?' 'Who are you *really*?' 'What is your story?' How do we set about becoming the people we were created to be?

Much of the academic work that is done on 'identity' finds that our identity—who we are really—is defined by our personal narrative, the story we tell about ourselves, what we remember.

I've been enjoying a fascinating novel called *The Finkler Question*. Posing as a dark comedy about anti-Semitism, as the title character, Finkler, believes that Israel should be criticized for some of its actions with regard to Palestinians, this book is really about Jewish identity or what it means to be Jewish. The author, Howard Jacobson won the Man Booker Prize for his novel last year. At various times and in various ways he looks at the things that make up Jewish culture: language and clothing, idiom and sex, philosophy and Zionism, but above all Jewish identity is found where all identity is found—in memory and the stories we tell each other. In the end, he is not only exploring Jewish identity but also all human identity. No one in the novel quite fits all the stereotypes, and no Jewish stereotypes quite work in real relationships. What does it mean to have some kind of continuity in time, to be distinctive and yet also to be affiliated with others as a human being? And the answer has something to do with memory and with the stories we tell about ourselves and others.

I know it is important to many of you that you are a Southerner, just as it is important to me that I grew up in England. In a way these are tribal identities and we know that competing tribes will often find themselves at enmity with each

other. Tribal violence or sectarian violence is generally avoidable when our particular tribal identity is not the predominant thing about us. Tribalism is a problem for identity. There are some who attempt to make Christianity into a tribe over against those other tribes of Islam or Judaism or whatever. But our story protects against that in its very being. Christianity is enculturated in many cultures and nations and can serve to mitigate tribal identity itself. We are not centered on a particular place (Medina or Mecca or Jerusalem) and we are not required to speak a particular language (Arabic or Hebrew).

There is another problem with this notion that our identity is bound up with what we remember and that is that memory is a somewhat fungible thing. You may know about the controversy around the whole business of 'recovered memories', especially in regard to memories of sexual abuse. Sometimes things we remember with every fiber of our being turn out to be false or misremembered in some way. In the end there has to be some degree of corroboration or communal story if we are to become the person and people we were created to be.

I remember hearing a Dutch theologian (whose name I cannot recall or find) pondering these issues as to what constitutes a human being around the question of severe mental incapacity. Challenges in his own family led him to research in this area and he came upon a young woman who had no capacity to remember. She had to be dressed every day and fed, lifted into bed at night and out of bed in the morning. She was clearly a body with some autonomic responses like the ability to swallow, but was she a person? As our intrepid theologian watched her over time, he noticed that in general the staff of the home where she lived—let's call her Nancy—would get her up in the morning, dress her, feed her, brush her teeth and her hair and then sit her in a chair in a high traffic area where she could be stimulated by a changing scene moment to moment. As people went past her, they would often speak. "You look nice today, Nancy." "How are you doing today, Nancy?" And if for some reason she wasn't there, they would ask: "Is Nancy alright?" "Where is Nancy today?" She had a body and a name, but no memory. Was there any sense in which she was conscious? What is it, beyond mere definition, which made her human? Or is there any sense in which she could be said to have had identity? What was going on, thought our theologian, was that Nancy was being given identity by the community who told a story about her, related to her in some sense, recognized her parents and so on. For truth, we need the story of a wider community to have a sense of who we are.

And so we are back to remembrance. Or being remembered. If we want to know and live into the person and people we have been created to be we do it in relation to our common story, the one we tell here around this table. In our story, the only source of identity is the Love that made us for Love. Sometimes Christians want to be a tribe over against other tribes (like Muslims or Jews for example) but our story guards against that by reminding us that the people of God necessarily include everyone that God has made. In our most traditional funeral rites, there was not homily, no eulogy, nothing that was really personal. All that would have been provided by the memories of those present. The content

of the liturgy was faith in the resurrection of a person who had been marked as Christ's own for ever at baptism. Here and around this table we both remember and are remembered by God. When Jesus said "Do this for the remembrance of me" he invited us to participate in the life of God that makes us more fully who we are. We sometimes pray about what we do here that "he may dwell in us and we in him", remembering the life-giving nature of our communion, shaped by a common story and toward what really matters for life: integrity, courage, a willingness to be differentiated from those around us even as we look for those places where we can recognize, understand and even appreciate difference, knowing that in the end, who we really are is given us by God.

As we remember the story of what really matters, so we sometimes begin to see ourselves more clearly through all the distortions of the atmosphere of our life and we start finding that the driest of our dry bones can live again as our bodies are remembered and, like Lazarus, we know that death does not have the victory. This new life might come as conviction and it might come as forgiveness for the pain we have caused others. New life can take the form of finding compassion where we thought our hearts were stony, or being able to forgive those who have caused us pain. In God's time, as we remember God's fidelity to us, the seemingly impossible can happen and dry bones can live. That reasonable and holy hope keeps us on the path to becoming the people we were created to be.

The process of becoming who we are is, in a sense, not natural in the story we tell. Our life is always a gift, an offering we make and a gift we receive back renewed in some way. What is the gift that you are being offered today as you become more fully the person you were created to be? Can these bones live? "Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live."

If we listen we can hear, claim and receive the promised gift of remembered life. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...