

Jesus Tells the Disciples to Wait for the Promise of the Father
A Sermon preached at BMC, Sunday May15th, 2022

Last week we found ourselves reflecting on a wonder-filled encounter between Jesus and Thomas where Jesus invited Thomas to touch the wounds that remained on his body. With the help of theologian and professor Shelly Rambo, one of the lessons that we learned about living in light of the resurrection is that in the resurrection God provides for possibilities of healing and rebirth “in the midst” or in the “in-between of life.” We learned that the presence of the risen Jesus among the disciples with wounds on his risen body did not give the disciples license to think of healing either as a kind of total overcoming of our woundedness and limitations now in this life *and* nor did his resurrection suggest to them that healing and transformation would only come in a distant hereafter. God’s power of new life had *already* begun its work in raising Jesus as the first fruits of the world’s transformation but there was much that was *not yet* healed and transformed. The challenges facing the disciples moving forward from that moment would include the challenge of navigating the tension between the *already* of the resurrection and the *not yet* of a world that continued to need transformation.

This tension between the already and the not yet is evident in both our scripture readings for today, but in different contexts and time periods. In our first scripture reading, we were transported into the prophet Ezekiel’s visionary experience of a valley of dry bones. While near this valley, God asks Ezekiel: “Mortal, can these bones live?” Can something so clearly dead and gone, really be restored to life again? Ezekiel answers: “O Lord God, You Know.” Then Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones and after seeing them rattle and come together and flesh come upon them, and skin cover them, Ezekiel is then told to prophesy breath into them. Then they all stand up, forming a “great multitude.” Who are these spooky figures dead and now alive? God

says, “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.'”

The “Israel” that is crying out about dried up bones and lost hope, was the Israel defeated and carried into exile by Babylon in the sixth century BCE. What God asks Ezekiel to do is to prophesy to *that* defeated Israel – to speak a promise to them, and this is the promise:

Thus says the Lord GOD: 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, says the LORD." - Ezekiel 37:12-14

This promise spoken by Ezekiel would be a powerful source of hope and imagination for the people of Israel as they lived in the *not yet* of their exilic existence. Whether under Babylon or later Rome, Israel *already* had been given God’s promise of new life, but they were being asked to wait for its coming; they were being asked to live with hope in the time between promise and fulfillment.

The question asked to Ezekiel in his vision, “Can these bones live,” or “can Israel be restored,” was likely a question that would have been on the disciple’s minds during Jesus’ ministry and then again following his death. They, like Israel in exile during Ezekiel’s prophecies, were waiting for fulfillment of the “promise” of new life spoken by the one they called “Father.” During Jesus’ ministry, the disciples wondered whether he was the one to fulfil the promise; the one who would restore the “kingdom of Israel,” a hope shared by many Jews of that age. Jesus seemed to the disciples to fit the bill for the hoped-for Messiah figure who would “restore all things” (Matt. 17:11; Mark 9:12) and “redeem Israel” (Lk. 24:21). It’s not surprising,

then, that when they found themselves together with the risen Jesus during the forty days that he appeared to him, that one of the burning questions they asked him was:

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

It was a natural question to ask for several reasons. First, it was reported that at the moment of Jesus' death

...tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. [and then] [a]fter his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. - **Matthew 27:52-53**

Sounds a little like Ezekiel's vision, doesn't it? And now, on top of it all, Jesus too was back, restored to new life after he had been placed in the tomb, as dead and lifeless as those dry bones in the valley. It would have seemed to the disciples as though Ezekiel's vision of life from death had come uniquely true in Jesus' resurrection! The promise was surely now being fulfilled! And so the question, "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel," was a very natural question to ask in such a wonder-filled time.

But, what is surprising about Jesus' answer to their question is that he doesn't really give one. In fact, he explicitly says "[i]t is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Jesus re-directs the disciples' question, and instead tells the disciples that they were to wait for "the promise of the Father" that would empower them to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) We can almost hear the disciples complain at this point: "But I thought the promise of the Father was the restoration of Israel! Are you telling us that there is a different promise to expect?" And, we can almost hear Jesus say, "The promise is the same. God promised that you would live and that God's spirit would live in you. Be careful not to assume that your restoration and the restoration of Israel will come about through a simple reconstruction of the previous arrangement as it was

before. Rather, your restoration will come through my new work in you through the Holy Spirit.” Just as God told Israel through Ezekiel that he would put his Spirit within them and make them to live, so now Jesus promises that the father will send that life-giving Holy Spirit to make them newly alive. But here, at this point, we could say that Jesus adds something new to Ezekiel’s vision—something that was not quite expected by that Prophet. In Jesus’ day, the disciples were not supposed to wait for the promise of the father so that they could experience a simple national restoration.¹ Rather, God was sending the promised Spirit so that they could be sent as effective and powerful witnesses *to Jesus* in and beyond their land. And so, Jesus says, don’t worry about *when*. Just wait for the promise of the father; wait for the Spirit, and then you will be ready to play a role in the restoration of all things.

As we continue to reflect on the significance of these forty days of wonder, I want us to focus especially on the two responses of Jesus to the disciples’ question this morning: “It’s not for you to know,” and wait “for the promise of the Father.” In these two responses, I wonder whether we might find our individual discipleship and our mission as the church clarified and sharpened. First, let’s focus on the response “It’s not for you to know.” Doesn’t Jesus’ answer fly in the face of our desire for certainty and control over the future?:

“I just want to know when things will be fixed. I want to know the way this will all pan out. In fact, you tell me how this will all work, and I will help you make it happen!”

There are a lot of things that we might want to know in life, both personally and corporately as a church. God, when will you restore this broken relationship? When will my physical or mental well-being be restored? When will this pandemic finally be over? When will the ceaseless killing of people and violence around the world ever stop? When will there be justice for the oppressed in our communities? When will the climate emergency be taken seriously? This list of questions

¹ Although this certainly was and had been part of Israel’s hope and vision of God’s end-time restoration.

could go on and on and there is nothing wrong with these questions. They are completely natural and may even or often spring from a righteous impatience with the unredeemed order of things. Perhaps you have found yourself asking a “when” question this morning too. When, Lord? When will your restoration come? Jesus’ answer, “it’s not for you to know,” might initially come off as a bit harsh and almost condescending in the face of these legitimate questions and longings. But I think within Jesus’ statement—“its not for you to know”—is a deep recognition that, as limited human beings in this vast universe, its not for us to know because our knowing is always limited. And regrettably, often our desire to know is much more than a desire to know but is rather a desire to pull the levers, to control the outcome of our lives through whatever means necessary. Hidden beneath the disciples’ question, “when will you restore the kingdom to Israel,” is perhaps the desire to make that restoration happen in the way or manner that they thought it should. But as we learned throughout Lent, “God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.”

Perhaps, then, if we were told the “when” and the “how” of God’s planned restoration in any given situation in our lives, we might be a bit put off by the plan God has. Perhaps we might suggest a better plan and try to put it into place instead. And in fact, this is exactly what us humans more often than not do! We scheme and plan and try to make a way towards what we think is human wholeness and flourishing and we mess it up in the worst ways. In many ways, I wonder if the disciples had yet again to learn that their assumptions about what God must be up to in the resurrection had to be challenged. “Surely now, after such a humiliating defeat on the cross, surely now that you are back, raised from the dead, you will make this all right. If you didn’t stand up to Caesar before the cross, maybe you will now after the resurrection! Surely now our nation will be restored to its greatness again! And yet, Jesus cautions the disciples

against such thinking. “It’s not for you to know.” In an age where nations flex military and economic muscle with devastating consequences, all in the name of making their “nations great again” or “restoring” the greatness of “kingdoms” and “empires” that had once been, Jesus’ answer stands as a stark challenge.

But, what Jesus says next, the second response Jesus gives to the disciples’ question, gives us hope: “wait for the promise of the Father,” for when you do that, “you will receive power” to be my witnesses. See, not knowing the “time” or the “hour” that God’s restoration will come—come in our lives, in our relationships, or in the many needy places in our world—this not knowing does not mean we are being asked to sit idly by, with nothing to do or that we will be left without any help or any purpose. God does have a task for us! And, that task even involves us in being part of the restoration of all things! But, it is a task that we do well to enter into with a good dose of humility and self-critical reflection, asking ourselves: “am I rushing into *my way* for God’s restoration, or am I waiting for the Spirit’s help and guidance and only then acting with confidence once I am empowered to do so? This kind of waiting does not come naturally for us, does it? And, *even when* we find ourselves willing to wait, even when the Spirit powerfully visits us, empowering us to be witnesses of Jesus, even then we sometimes resist. We resist because the Spirit often tends to take us down paths that, by the world’s standards, seem like odd detours. Why not just take the direct path—why not just move right to fixing things rather than taking what seems to be the roundabout way?

Have you ever had the Spirit lead you on what feels like a detour in life? Have you had a longing for God’s transformative work in your life or in someone else’s life that came, but only after a path and a route that you would never have yourself chosen? I can’t help but think that the disciples must have felt they were being led on yet another detour when Jesus told them to not

worry about the time that Israel would be restored but just to wait. Why not just bring the kingdom now, Jesus? You've been raised from the dead as the first fruits of Israel's resurrection. Why not finish the deal? Restore the kingdom! But Jesus told them to not get ahead of themselves and to wait for the promise of the Father who would make them witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And then, as witnesses to the risen Jesus, the disciples, like Ezekiel over a valley of dry bones, would be ready to prophesy new life, not only to Israel but to the Gentiles too.

In these 40 days of wonder, we are being invited by Jesus to not be distracted or consumed by wanting to know the "time" or the "hour" of restoration in our own or other's lives. What we are being invited to is a kind of holy contentment in not knowing *and* we are being invited into a space of holy, active waiting for God to send the promised Spirit to empower us for the work of witnessing to Jesus' life-giving power in the world. And so, in our doubts about the future ahead of us, in our doubts about whether our own "dry bones" can live, in our uncertainties about the restoration we so desire for ourselves or others, may we pray in faith: "O Lord You Know" so I don't need to. And may we trust that as we wait on God, God will send us the promised Spirit to help us live like and witness to Jesus, who waited on God's spirit throughout his life, entered deeply into the broken places of our world, and revealed the beauty that can come when God's touches even the dry, barren valleys of life. AMEN.