

Dead Man Walking or Life of the Living Dead

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Texts: Ezek. 37

Rom. 8:6-11

John 11

Zombies are very popular these days. (that's a fun opening line to a sermon!) Did you know that zombies are popular? Perhaps you still think of the classic 1968 movie "Night of the Living Dead", but zombies have come a long ways since then – these days people can't get enough of zombies: movies, television shows, video games, books. And I'd say the zombie craze culminated in the recent \$190m budget blockbuster movie "World War Z" – that's Z for Zombies – starring Brad Pitt. Did any of you see that?...I did...my wife didn't – lots of people did – \$500m worth. LOTS of zombies – lots of destroying zombies – it was pretty good - there will be a sequel.

Well how about a theological analysis of this zombie craze? One way to look at it, is that zombies are the modern answer to eternal life – zombies are the new afterlife. Being an undead zombie may not sound so appealing, but I wonder if somewhere in there is a critique of the more traditional Christian view of eternal life – a view that could be caricatured as 'pie in the sky, by and by' – just biding time now for an escape to eternal life later. We might see that as an unfair caricature, but I think the perception is there – that somehow a heavenly eternity makes the here and now less important. And if you don't believe in heaven anyways, at least zombies are something!

This sermon, not too shockingly, asserts that between zombie apocalypse and heavenly escape, there is something different that Scripture, faith, God has to offer to us – a sense of life, death, and resurrection that inhabits our day to day in a way that is substantial and meaningful. And the way into that something different begins with the Romans 8 passage that we read today – but I have to say that I began there rather grudgingly, resistant-ly. I don't mean to pick on the Apostle Paul, but this Romans passage at first read was not very appealing. The passage from Ezekiel? 'dem dry bones brought to life – RUACH - so vivid; the story of Lazarus? – so dramatic, such emotion and power. But Paul? – all he can talk about is 'flesh, flesh, flesh'. I hear that from Paul and I just tend to tune him out, or really I guess I project that's what most people will do. It seems a rather tired message that the flesh-body is bad, people in general are bad - with a call instead to a sort of ethereal, disembodied, spirit focus. 'Of the flesh' is for bad people; we'll try to be good – but it all makes faith sound like judgment and drudgery – almost zombie like?!

Well, I've been converted in my view of this passage from Paul – seeing in it freedom and joy rather than judgment and drudgery - and that's why I want to start there, and see if you might see that too. So what if we start at the end? – verse 11...with a bit of editorial emphasis from me:

If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you (YOUR BODY), God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies (YOUR BODY) also through his Spirit that dwells in you (YOUR BODY).

I simply am pointing out that Paul's ends up talking about a very embodied spirituality – flesh-y, even – nothing escapist or disembodied. And so what I'm trying to get at, is that when Paul starts off talking about 'flesh, flesh, flesh' – it's not a puritanical rant; what Paul is setting up a contrast between is life closed off

from God (that's flesh), or life open to God (that's spirit) – but they both happen right here in the body. What the 'flesh' is about is human life as a closed system that sees itself without God, left to its own devices. And that's deadly – whatever you might see that's wrong with this world: conflict, injustice, immorality, despair, division, violence – it's the bitter fruit of life closed off from God, whether by an intention chosen or by a consequence inflicted – that's the flesh – deadly.

So then when Paul speaks of Spirit/God/Christ/resurrection, it is not about something ethereal, out there – it is about life, here, now, embodied, enfleshed even! – but it is life open to God rather than closed off. It is the life we are created for, life in relationship with God that shapes human life into community – that is the life of the spirit, life open to God, God with us.

Did you notice a peculiar thing Paul says at the end: 'God will...give life to your mortal bodies'? – well wait, isn't your body already alive? or is this about future eternal life? No, it's the rather serious reality that we are dead – it's the Life of the Living Dead - we live in a world of that deadly flesh system of life – a world where at times our lives and at times others' are closed off from God; a world in which people inflict and suffer the deadly fruits of shutting off from God's ways of life. The life these mortal bodies of ours need, is a faith that daily is claimed by a different way – the life of the Spirit that is formed by the gifts of God given for us and for all – or you could say, the gifts of resurrection and eternity, present here and now.

So then, from Romans that's the view of flesh and spirit, of death and life, that we can bring to those marvelous stories in John and Ezekiel. In the story of Lazarus there is so much there – it is stunning – the extraordinary capstone to all the signs

Jesus has done as part of his life: bringing Lazarus, who was dead, back to life – it defies our experience, and you can get stuck either being incredulous or just sure it's too fantastic to be relevant. But what is this story about? – it seems to me to blare loudly that this sign of Jesus raising Lazarus is pointing to the power and presence of God not in the by and by but in the now. Throughout the story Jesus speaks of resurrection and life as present and shared through him; when Martha wants to speak about the future, the last day, Jesus brings the focus back to the present. There is no taking away of that future promise and truth, but it is a step further to claim the same promise and truth for the present. Lazarus was dead – Jesus raises him from the dead, to his body, to proclaim God's life-giving power and presence in more than the by and by.

Those dry bones in Ezekiel – what to do with them? - well, the answer for those bones is not the by and by, the answer is some flesh (no offense to Paul) – that's what the spirit, breath, RUACH blows onto those resuscitated bones. And Paul would not be offended – it's precisely what we heard from Paul. To a people who have shut out God both through waywardness and despair – a closed system; the breath, Spirit of God brings a present tense resurrection. There is a different reality that blows open this closed system – the Spirit of God brings into these bodies, into this people, into their history, restoration, life, direction, hope.

We can look at life, and see it is flesh – cut off from God's ways of life: waywardness, yes – injustice, violence, harm to creation too – suffering, death; it's all there. We can look at life, and it is spirit – enlivened with the breath of God present now – in faithfulness, in justice, in peace, in hope - and in Christ we are witnesses to such life, and to the God who is resurrection and life. There is death around us, and we will die – if you haven't noticed, you're not paying attention

(and a lot of people don't). But we witness to the truth that not only in death do we go to God, but in life God comes to us – that Spirit, breathe, resurrection, life are present to create in and through us the life God gives and wants for this earth – if we haven't noticed that, we're not paying attention either. In the holy days and week soon before us, that is the story to pay attention to – 'can these bones live?' – Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life' Amen.