

# If

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year A, 3/26/23

“If.” How much can turn on so little a word.

As the historian Plutarch tells it,

A prominent example involves Philip II of Macedon. After invading southern Greece and receiving the submission of other key city-states, he turned his attention to Sparta and asked menacingly whether he should come as friend or foe. The reply was "Neither."

Losing patience, [Philip] sent the message:

If I invade Laconia, I shall turn you out.

The Spartan ephors again replied with a single word:

If.

Philip proceeded to invade Laconia, devastate much of it, and eject the Spartans from various parts [of it],<sup>1</sup>

But not, interestingly, from Sparta itself. The laconic, and often brutal, rulers of that ancient anti-Athens had apparently made their point. But so, they learned, had Philip.

“If” in today’s gospels story has a similarly powerful reach, or makes an equivalently heartrending turn, if you like. “If you had been here,” Martha says to Jesus, “My brother would not have died.” (Don’t ask why she didn’t say “Our brother;”) If only you’d have been here, Jesus. Where were you, anyway? How could you have been anywhere else when we needed you this much? If you really loved us, you would have already known to be where we needed you to be before any of us knew it.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laconic\\_phrase](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laconic_phrase), and the footnotes citing Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica*, 233e and *De garrulitate*, 17.

“If” brings to mind all the paths not taken, all the choices not made, the opportunities missed, the contingencies left contingent, the possibilities not realized. “If only we’d listened to...”. “If only I hadn’t...” or “had...”. “If only I were thinner or younger or fitter or more fine, or smarter or kinder or had a wider range of sources of income, oh, what I could do. Oh, what we could do.”

“Careful with that,” my dissertation adviser once warned me. “That way madness lies.”

We can drive ourselves crazy, thinking about what might have been, or even what should have been, as opposed to what actually is. Could things have been other than they are? “What might have been, and what has been, point to one end, which is always present,” as I never cease quoting from T.S. Eliot. But that truth – that tautology, really – doesn’t get to the heart of the question. Could things really have been other than they were? Could we really have made different choices, given all that went into our making the ones we did, regret them though we might later on? We like to think that we would have, and hindsight is 20/20, as they say. Oh, if only I knew then what I know now...but there it is, that little word “If” again. If only, if only. I wonder if God ever has the same regrets – I mean nowadays. We know in the Bible that God had plenty of regrets, and when in the thrall in regret, often does something They will regret later.

Ought we rather concur with Hamlet in one of his final observations (Act 5, Scene 2) as he says to his friend Horatio, that, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will.”

As a wise person once said, “We don’t get to choose which way the wind blows. We only get to decide how best to stand in the face of it.”

Might we not, indeed, conclude with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds. Given all that is and must be, things have worked out as best they could. Ours may not be the best of all *imaginable* worlds, that great early modern philosopher would be the first to admit. But ours is the best that could actually be, given everything else that is and has been.

As has been the case throughout Lent, the readings we have assigned today are set well for our times, caught between the “What might have been” had we taken climate change and global warming seriously decades ago, or the rise of authoritarian liars and their cynically scrivening enablers, and the “What has been” since too few of us did, and what the best of all possible worlds can now be, and how far that is from the ideal. If we hear them carefully, we learn much about how to hope, even in the midst of loss.

The bones that were dry in the valley in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 37, were the bones of those who had fallen as victims to the empires that had destroyed the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah. All those who had died because of the evil, and sometimes the incompetence, of those with power over them, not least of which was the power to destroy.

As is the case with so many of the texts in the Bible, the words we find written in the book of this prophet are a response to trauma, to the suffering of people who did not deserve to suffer, and perhaps of some who did, and the difficulty we have in making sense of that kind of loss and that kind of pain. We all see the same news reports from around the world of people who suffer, and sometimes die, from a virus that could affect any of us. We have long seen pictures from all around the world, close to home and far away, who suffer for all manner of reasons, both from forces

of nature or those of (in)humanity, and many of those, if not most, who suffer are innocent, and made victims by the guiltiest who still draw breath.

Such was the case to which Ezekiel speaks, and to which the Lord spoke to him, in a valley full of the bones of the dead who did not deserve to die. And he asks the poet a question, the Lord does. He asks him, “Shall these bones live?” Until Ezekiel sees the great power of God made manifest upon them, there is no way he could believe, or even imagine, that the answer could be yes, that the bones could come back to life, and the dead have breath again. But that is the story that has come down to us. The Lord uses that image to put into the mind and the heart and in the eyes and on the tongue of the prophet so that the people might know, who read and hear his words, that the bones in the valley that have dried in the wind and the dust and the sun have not reached the end of their story. The Lord wants the prophet and his hearers to know that he will restore the fortunes of his people, bring the descendants of the captives home, and guide them to live again the lives he had meant them to live, in the land that he’d set for them to live in.

Thus, Ezekiel, in the midst of the great trauma of the destruction of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem found that his God, our God, was giving him hope in a way that made him look carefully at the hard things of his world, but then look through them to see where the power of God would be made real in turning that horror into something good that would last.

The reading from Ezekiel is echoed in the story of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha – two sisters and a brother who became three of Jesus’s closest friends and followers. Despite that, and for reasons we do not know, or if we do know them I have forgotten, Lazarus died – too young, too soon, and he was deeply mourned by his family and his friends. But Mary’s question to Jesus, or actually her statement, that “If you had been here, my brother would not have died,” sears the heart. She knows that the

power of God is real in this man who walked among them, their friend, their neighbor, their teacher. They knew that his power could save lives, restore those who had lost hope, heal the sick, free the prisoners, release the tongues of those who could not speak, open the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind, and make God's power real to those who had never felt it, or who denied it, or who resisted it, and most of all, those who needed it most, and had just enough faith to hope, even if only for a moment, that it could come true. What Mary must've gone through as she watched her brother weaken, and sicken, and die, all while Jesus, her rabbi, her teacher, was elsewhere, is a pain we all know too well. It is the pain of grief at being unable to stop one whom we love from going down to death.

The story has a beautiful and happy ending, though, even if we manage not to laugh at the bad joke about the bad smell coming from the grave. In it, Jesus comes and sees the grief of his people, and in the eyes of his friends, and lets forth the power of God – as everything in the Gospel of John says he does – to let Lazarus walk out of the grave and be restored to life, and presumably to health, in a way that gave joy unimagined, undreamt-of, and unparalleled.

Yet there is in this story a sadness for me, and it is hard sometimes to recognize or admit. Many people have prayed and longed over the years to receive the gift that Mary and Martha, and indeed Lazarus, have received: that their dead should not have died, or that they would walk out of the grave. We know that that does not happen. Our faith teaches us that on the last day when the trumpet shall sound and the dead be raised and all will be present to the glory of God in the life that is to come, world without end. Even at the grave we make our song “Alleluia, Alleluia” Praise God. And then we say goodbye, at least for now, to those whom we love, those who we grieve, and those whom we will miss.

So this lesson can be hard to hear in times of loss, or the greatest blessing we could imagine. The idea that there was someone on this earth who could've done something to stop someone dying before it was time gives me great hope and great challenge. If we take such lessons to heart, we open ourselves not only to regrets for paths not taken, but to possibilities yet unexplored. If we could have saved the world decades ago if only we had listened to those who know what from and how, we still have to chance to do as much as we can now. If we learn from our mistakes, our tomorrows can be better than our yesterdays, or at least better than they would be if we simply keep on and make no changes. If we try, we might succeed. If we don't, we never will.

In that spirit, let me close with a blessing and a prayer: May God's peace be with you this morning and every day, God's grace be upon you, God's salvation always close, God's love always real, and God's power keep you in the palm of Their hand, as the apple of Their eye, and guide you under the shadow of Their wing. *Amen.*