

Ed, it's the fifth Sunday of Lent. Next week we'll celebrate Palm Sunday on our way into Holy Week as we continue this journey towards Easter. I think about you in this season, because I know your last Easters here were not easy. The two stories we read today, the dry Bones from Ezekiel and the raising of Lazarus from John, are probably the same stories you read at this time of the year. Both speak to us of death and of new life, and how I'd like to share those stories of this place with you.

I never got to meet you before your death, but I've heard so much about you. I've read in our session minutes how every year as you prepared for Easter during the last years of your ministry here, you confronted with the session debates about whether we would allow "negroes" (the language used at that time) into worship or not. I've read about the stand you made in 1963, how we would indeed welcome all whom God welcomes, and I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for you when that discussion was tabled to see what would happen on Easter morning. (pause) What would happen on Easter morning?

I also know that you'd be gone from this place, that you'd preach your last sermon from this pulpit before that year's end. I've read in Blessed are the Peacemakers¹ about your life before and after the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. I've read there how at the end of your life you lamented that after eighteen years of ministry here that your only "claim to fame" had been King's letter from the Birmingham jail.²

Well I need to tell you two things today. First, that's not your only claim to fame. You've held the longest tenure of any pastor here at First Presbyterian Church. I've heard the members of this congregation who were here at that time talk about the impact you had on their lives. I know these stained glass windows were put here while you were the pastor, and they still shine on our worship today. And I'm amazed you led this church from 1945, the end of World War II, through the 1950's and into 1963, the height of the Civil Rights Movement here in Birmingham.

However, you also need to know that we are proud today of your connection to the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. I tell people our pastor in 1963, Reverend Edward Ramage, was one of the addressed recipients of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham jail, and that he took a stand that we would welcome all whom God welcomes. I can't even begin to know how dearly that cost you. However I do know that you came down on the right side of history, and that our church today is in large part who we are because of that welcome you were willing to extend. So I say thank you Ed.

And we should say thank you Ed to the pastor that followed you, Ed Hay. For it was under his leadership, that the session recorded perhaps the most important line in our congregation's history. You see I was born in Selma. It was in 1965 that Ed Hay came to this church, the very same year my hometown brutally beat and turned back the civil rights marchers as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge (just blocks from where I grew up). Ed Hay came to this church in January of that year, and just a few short months later he, like you before him, was confronting with the session what to do if "negroes" came to worship on Easter morning. You'd be glad to know that that question seems foreign and even ludicrous to us now, but I know it was no simple issue at that time.

That spring of 1965 Elders Caldwell and Tynes called a meeting of the session for the purpose of discussing possible visitation by Negroes at the Easter Service.³ After discussion

¹ Bass, Jonathan. *Blessed are the Peacemakers*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 212.

³ From the April 15, 1965 Session minutes of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama – currently housed in the archives of the Birmingham Public Library's Henley Building.

Caldwell made a motion: That should there be any Negroes visit the Sanctuary on Easter Morning that the Ushers quietly seat them in any convenient pew available without disturbing Worshippers, and that the ushers be so advised by Mr. Hay (who agreed to do so). The motion was seconded and carried with one minor and monumental change. In the minutes of that meeting (which are now housed the archives of the Birmingham Public Library) there is a line drawn through the words ~~on Easter Morning~~, perhaps the most important line in our congregation's history. I do not know who made that recommendation; however I smile as I imagine Ed Hay moderating that meeting on April 15th, 1965, that resulted in such Grace. And for that too, I say thank you Ed.

I bring this up today for two reasons. First, the reality is the aftermath of this time in our history, Ed, could be seen by many as deadly. In your own personal life, I know you would have a heart attack after you left this place for Houston. In what ways did that which happened here break your own heart? It was also heartbreaking what happened to this congregation and to this downtown following the 1960's.

For many years it was as if this city center was dying, and many would have said the same of this congregation. After you led this church through one of its largest periods of growth, there would be repeated invitations to this congregation amidst the ensuing decline to leave this church and follow others out of the city. Thankfully some didn't. Perhaps they heard Jesus' words to Martha as words to themselves, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." Surely there are many things that died here, and some of them needed to. There have been many people who have died here since as well, but you need to know today that First Presbyterian Church lives on. "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

I'm here today to tell you that I do. I've learned that Resurrection is not limited to the afterlife. I'm watching this church recover a new vitality, and oh how I wish you could see it. It is as if the sinews have been laid again. Breath has been breathed into this place from the four winds. Forty-five years later Ed, there is a noise, a rattling of dry bones coming together in this church and in this city. We have heard the words of the prophets and the Word of the LORD, and our hope is not lost.

I'm also bringing this up today because I'm about to go on a sabbatical. I am thankful that I was ordained at a time when the church encourages its pastors to honor the rhythm of Sabbath rest and renewal through pastoral sabbaticals. I wonder what impact a sabbatical (or two) would have had on your ministry here. I want you to know that I intentionally planned my sabbatical departure so that I could be here through Holy Week and for the celebration of Easter. It pains me to think that your last Easters here were in some way marred by the question, "What's going to happen on Easter morning?" I want you to know that the good news is that Resurrection is going to happen on Easter morning. Resurrection, my friend, is already happening here.

A few weeks ago, I was at a gathering with 47 other pastors and church leaders who are also preparing for an upcoming sabbatical. The Louisville Institute brought us together to share our stories and to discuss best sabbatical practices. A Presbyterian colleague of ours and former sabbatical grant recipient, William Carter, was invited to preach during worship on our last morning together.

As I settled into the chapel that morning before we began and looked over the order of worship, I laughed and smiled because Bill for his sermon had chosen these very same stories from Ezekiel and John that we read here today. I knew I'd be preaching this morning my last

sermon before going on sabbatical (from the very same pulpit where you preached), and I'd already been up early that morning thinking and reading from Ezekiel and John. It was good to hear these stories again.

Bill asked the congregation gathered for that special convocation to consider which of the characters in this story had the most to teach us. He suggested the person who was most worthy of our pre-sabbatical attention was Lazarus. For, "All Lazarus does is to die. He lets it all go. He bids farewell...Biblically speaking, he goes to sleep. He falls into the soil like a seed, and stays there."⁴

Bill went on to say, "The number one reason why you and I resist going on a sabbatical is because it's too much like death. On the day we die, we will have to let everything go. We have to relinquish control. We have to allow somebody else to oversee the heavens and the earth. And that is bloody difficult (for us to do)."

Honestly, until I heard his sermon, I had not thought before about death as a metaphor for sabbatical, but it began to make sense to me. "Lazarus was granted his sabbatical," Bill said, "– three days in a tomb. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't go anywhere. He couldn't return a phone call (or write an e-mail) from inside that hole. Lazarus simply had to wait...wait to be raised." So I take this new metaphor with me as I go – waiting...waiting and watching for what God will say and do.

Ed, I think death and waiting in hope for Resurrection is an appropriate metaphor for the life this congregation. Letting go and relinquishing control. "This is God's church, not our church," you used to say.⁵ Allowing somebody else to oversee the heavens and the earth and this congregation for that matter. You had to do that. I'm about to do that for several months, and I wanted to tell you about my sabbatical today because you have helped to shape it. Longtime members of this congregation tell us how you used to stand at this very same table in those difficult days and say that here, "We welcome those whom God welcomes." My sabbatical is an exploration into the art and the essence of communion, and in part thanks to the courageous stand you made here, I'll be exploring what it means to prepare a table of welcome today as a husband, father, friend, culinary enthusiast, and as a pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama. I am glad to be a colleague of yours. I am honored to stand in this very same place where you took a stand, and I just wanted to say this morning, "Thank you."

⁴ Rev. William G. Carter, Feb. 20th, 2007, sermon, "It's about Time," preached at the Caldwell Chapel of Louisville Seminary for the Commissioning of the Louisville Institute's Sabbatical Grant for Pastoral Leaders 2007 recipients.

⁵ An Ed Ramage quote remembered by members of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama.