God Comes to Nothing

Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Luke 1:26-38 August 24, 2025

If the title of our sermon seems for some to affirm the obvious, that religion and God all comes to nothing—too bad the title didn't go viral; even more might have come. No surprise, our theme will veer far from that dismissal; but it may surprise many, that for virtually every best-known figure of the Bible, the story tells that God comes to nothing. God only comes to nothing.

Think about the valley of dry bones. Of course this passage sources the song "knee bone connected to the thigh bone, thigh bone connected to the hip bone," but if that silly fun blots out memory of when and where Ezekiel lived, we lose. In 587 B.C., Babylon sacked Jerusalem, destroyed its temple and its walls, killed thousands and exiled thousands across the desert far from home. Ezekiel lived with the exiles for whom hope for home lay dry as bones.

Like Gazans: dry bones. Sudanese: dry bones. Ukrainians: dry bones. Is it too unlike their torture to sort the dry bones of the United States—the Untied States—of America, here, where near two hundred fifty years ago we declared that all people are created equal; where now the top of government daily grinds up the roots of honesty, probity, equality, and knowledge-in-our-people in order to install lies, corruption, racism, and ignorance, and to turn elections free and fair to fantasy. "The Lord set me down in a valley full of bones . . . very many . . . and they were very dry. And God said, 'Mortal, can these bones live?'"

Now, I hope that all these torrential reigns of terror may stop. But what sort of hope is that? I call it ordinary hope—hope for what we can see, or think we can see. Though oriented to the future, ordinary hope connects to things familiar, seen in the past. Like a spark, such hopes try to jump the gap between desire and success. They are natural to every creature with eyes. A bear for a fish, or a dog after a Frisbee hopes for what it sees. And our imagination, unlike animals', stretches that frame for what is seen far into the future. We hope the train arrives on time so the interview go right. We hope the baby comes with ten fingers, ten toes and not too soon. We hope our life matters. We hope the afflicted may rise and that the mighty might be put down from their thrones. Though many of our most dearly held hopes rest unrealized within us, still, we have seen them in promises of prophets or parents, preachers, even presidents. Hopes we think small we call wishes and hopes beyond our powers, prayers. But every hope with a name is drawn from the treasury of thought. If often beautiful and often necessary, never are ordinary hopes new. They are what the apostle Paul calls "hope that is seen"—of which he says, Hope that is seen is not hope. (Rom 8:22)

For hope has another kind. I call it "absolute hope." Hope without any object, hope as an inward resolution naming no solution. Hope that God come to nothing, though I know not how or what must change.

At about twenty-five years of age, I was staying a night out of town. I did not then think myself a Christian, but having been raised in church, felt familiar with the Bible and took the one from the night stand, leafing through with no aim. I read from I Corinthians (2:9), "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

I thought: "I didn't know they thought this—"they" meaning Christians, and "this," that they know they know nothing of God's goodness. Paul's wall of negations affirming his absolute hope in God pushed me against a wall that I did not know existed. I did not know that used-up words like love and God could fly free of all doctrines and qualities. I did not know that they knew that no one grasps what lies in light alone. I didn't know the Christian thing at all. This encounter did not make me a Christian, for I knew nothing of this hope. But I sensed perfectly clearly that the apostle's hope stood absolute of any object whatsoever—a hope not seen. I felt how real his was, though I encountered nothing. This is how absolute hope teaches. It brings you to a door that did not exist—a valley of dry bones, where God comes to nothing.

In his Theology of Hope, theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, "According to Ezekiel, the people of the promise can now recognize themselves only in the picture of dead bones . . . of hope that has come to nothing, and are then given to hear the prophetic message of a new promise of life." (p. 209) Yes! But not—absolutely not—in answer to their ordinary hopes, absolutely not as if in answer to prayer, or because they did the right thing which met God's favor and so they got their life back. No. Not that.

Ordinary hopes always have a political characteristic, a wish for more power, more strength. I hope mom lets me go to that party. I hope I have what it takes to endure this, or get that. We hope enough voters will send the other party packing. And the big one: We hope and pray that God is on our side, and will hear our prayer and do what we want. Egad! Hopes aimed godward to a being who responds to prayers like a ward boss—ignoring the weak and desperate who dare not pray and for whom none pray, but a smiling politician for petitions organized in sufficient numbers. Ridiculous. God has nothing to do with the ways we ordinarily hope to gather power to achieve our goals. God is not on a side. Not ours, not theirs. God comes to nothing.

A sermon is not a Bible study, so I'll draw this short. To Abram parched to death at Haran, God comes. To Sarah, barren and old, God comes, and

laughter follows. To Abraham empty of plans, his blade sent in sorrow high over his son's small frame, God comes. To Jacob alone on the lam, with but a stone for a pillow, God in the night comes. To Moses on the mount at Canaan's edge, empty of hope for the promised land before him, God comes. To Elijah in the empty cave, God comes—not in earthquake, wind, or fire, but in nothing God comes—in a still small voice. To Job in pestilent privation; to Jesus forty days famished; to Jesus on the cross forsaken, God comes. To Saul, sight gone; to Peter's old time religion overturned by a vision of unclean creatures, God comes. To Malcolm in prison; to Martin-I-may-not-get-there-with-you, God comes. Not in the way the body craves good things does God come; not in the way fear frames its need does God come; not how money-minded men manipulate the future does God come. No. God comes when we meet nothing, and see it. Am I proof-texting this theme from the Bible? No. This cataract pours down from the tradition like a mighty river. I am telling you the old, old story: God comes to nothing.

Does someone say, I don't know what he is talking about? That is normal, as it should be. It means no great crisis has come. It means one is like Mary encountering the absolutely unknown—a divine messenger. "Much perplexed by his words, she pondered what sort of greeting this might be." Much perplexed by his words, one might ponder what sort of sermon this might be. Nevertheless, the angel's word to maiden Mary tells that God comes to nothing. That is the pearl of great price in the story of the virgin birth. People have known it and hoped it, however unconsciously, and have therefore told it over and again—that even to me in my emptiness, my ignorance, my despair, my nothing, God may come. "How shall this be," she asks, "seeing I have known no man?'" How shall this be, seeing I have no hope? 'With God, nothing shall be impossible.'" (Luke 1.34,37) God comes to nothing.

The great Buddhist teacher Keiji Nishitani reflected on this theme this way:

> We become aware of religion as a need, as a must for life, only at the level of life at which everything else loses its necessity and its utility. Why do we exist at all? Is not our very existence ultimately meaningless? When we come to doubt the meaning of our existence . . . when we have become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us. These questions . . . show up . . . where that mode of living which puts [our self] at the center of everything is overturned . . . A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands." (Nishitani, Religion and Nothingness, p. 3)

Now reflect with me on Psalm 62, which we read together moments ago: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God." The Psalms are filled with this declaration of independence from all systems. When I am empty and hopeless, I wait.

In the words of a Jesuit psychologist, "To be able to wait . . . includes the ability to handle hopelessness. It will not panic at [the] appearance of the hopeless. It is, rather, active. . . It confronts hopelessness . . . but does not yield to its assault." (Lynch, Images of Hope, p. 179)

Look, tyranny is now loping over the lands, mangling ordinary hopes and humans with its assault. Hope for what we do not see, absolute hope, is needful now. Was our American experiment—to honor all, all created equal, and to decide whether this nation, or any nation so conceived, can long endure—was that an ordinary hope? If it was, it will close as soon as too many hopes dashed make too many too weary to work it.

But if in absolute hope, in absolute faith, we set our face like flint, waiting, not yielding to hopelessness, free from attachment to the fruits of our action, then we can put shoulder to wheel of justice. Then we can work without fear or deception or hatred that love might order our life together in the spirit of Christ. And if peace and democracy come not while we still have breath, we shall not be shaken. "On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God." For God comes . . . to nothing.

Do you know the novel The Road, by Cormac McCarthy? Disaster of unnamed cause has consumed the world. The sun is blocked deep in dust. No animals or plants live, and few humans. Some eat others. A father, very ill, struggles southward on the road with and for his young son. Toward what? He has no solution to that. He has hope only. Absolute hope. Near the very end—the father at death's edge—those two have this exchange: (p. 281)

Boy: Do you remember that little boy we saw, Papa? . . . Do you think he's all right, that little boy?

Father: I think he's all right.

Boy: But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?

Father: Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.

Amen.

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