

Lent 5 (A) – April 10, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
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Ezekiel 37:1-14

I am grateful that Liz held out till after Mom died. My mother loved Elizabeth Taylor. All during my childhood Mom would say, "Son, there's no more beautiful and elegant woman in all of Hollywood than Elizabeth Taylor." Those words were always more punctuated when spoken in a muddy, hapless, trailer park in Pascagoula, Mississippi or at the projects on the underside of Atlanta, Georgia.

Regardless of where we landed, early each morning mother teased her dark tresses into a Liz Taylor hairdo. She artfully applied her make-up, and completed the task by adorning herself with dangling earrings that sparkled when they caught the light – just like Liz's. So, if you caught my mother away from the trailer park or projects, you might mistake her for Liz because she sparkled like her.

Put all the externals aside, and I think what Mom really admired about Liz was her later life. "Liz has guts," Mom would declare. And Mom should know because she, too, was one gutsy lady. Ridiculed by the pundits as a has-been, Liz always rose above her detractors. Caught by the paparazzi deep in her cups or flailing wildly at Richard Burton, Liz never lost her grace. Humiliated on *Saturday Night Live* for her weight problems – by John Belushi of all people – Liz would not return meanness for meanness. Denounced for her procession of eight turbulent marriages, including two with Burton, Liz continued to ardently seek love and to generously offer it. In the face of all that, Liz had the guts and the class to persevere. And she could laugh about herself. Made a *Dame of the Realm* by Queen Elizabeth II, she retorted that she had always been called a "broad" – not a "dame."

Yet Liz's real guts showed up in 1985. Her lifelong friend Rock Hudson died of AIDS, a terrible emaciating death. Against the grain of public opinion, Liz began one of the earliest crusades against that misunderstood and cruel disease. At last count, she had raised 465 million to combat the disease. By the looks of things, it has been money well spent.

In what others considered her most foolish alliance, Liz's faithfulness showed up in her fidelity to Michael Jackson. Even though Jackson – through his own bad and perverse behavior – was reduced to a pitiful shell of the music icon he once was, Liz refused to abandon him when most everyone else of note disappeared. Once again, often wheelchair-bound like my Mom, the old girl showed she had guts. There was still fight in her. Anyone with a lick of sense could tell Jackson's celebrity career was at a dead end, but Liz's love for him was not.

Perhaps Hollywood can teach us a little something about the vision God granted to Ezekiel. I dare not push this comparison too far, yet today I would like to look at this through my mother's eyes. Suffice it to say that anyone around the Mediterranean with a lick of sense in 6th century BC considered Israel at a dead end. Israel's death spiral, much like some of the entertainment and sports stars we once admired, was due to their perverse, destructive appetites, and their lack of faithfulness to the God who cast the dream of Israel.

Carted off into exile in Babylon, it seems – even to young Ezekiel the prophet – that the dream of Israel will die there between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Israel’s priests and prophets will grow old and be buried in Babylonian soil, and Israel’s next generation will be acculturated into the cosmopolitan, market economy of Babylon and Greece and fade indistinctly into their landscape. To anyone with eyes and sense, Israel will be no more.

In the midst of their corrosive situation, God grants Ezekiel a visionary dream as vivid as any Hollywood epic. The prophet sees Israel has been reduced to nothing more than a deserted dark valley of dry, decaying bones (**Ezekiel 37:1-2**). God interrupts the vision and asks, “Ezekiel, is there any life left in these bones?” For all the world we expect the young prophet to respond, “Not likely!” Instead he respectfully answers, “Lord, only you know that” (**Ezekiel 37:3**). Then like a scene from a B-grade movie, the bones on that field come together and are knit together with sinews, muscle, flesh, blood, and guts. Next, like a rerun of Genesis 2:7 where God animated the first human, the Lord breathes life into what was once just a bunch of corpses (**Ezekiel 37:5-10**).

Even though Israel is only a *skeleton* of the great plans God has had for her, God could never forget her. The guts of the dream have not been completely doused yet. God will not forsake Israel, but breathe new life into her. The Hebrew word for this kind of reason-defying love is *hesed*. The word is used 250 times in the Old Testament and is the watchword for the love God expresses to fickle Israel and to us. It is a Liz kind of love.

It is a gutsy move by God. Not since Israel’s first steps out of Egypt 650 years before, has the community been able to remain faithful to God. Is there any guarantee she will repent and do a complete turnabout this time? No, but that does not keep God from trying. About 100 years before the great exile, Hosea catches the deepest sense of God’s *hesed* – His steadfast love for Israel:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

*Yet it was I who taught Israel (Ephraim) to walk, I took them in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with chords of human kindness, with bands of love; I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down and fed them. **Hosea 11:1-4***

And 700 years after Hosea prophesied those words that express a love that transcends what we humans deserve or expect, Jesus catches the same spirit of unshakeable love as he approaches Jerusalem for the last time:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See your house is left to you desolate. For I

tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' **Matthew 23:37-39**

Neither his disgust over the self-serving, malicious bureaucrats in David's royal city nor his certainty that the Jerusalem mob will heed these sick leaders and denounce him too, will keep Jesus from gathering enough guts to finish his journey at Calvary. Denounced, ridiculed, and humiliated, Jesus will complete his course of love.

Dismiss the temptation to conclude this is all about God's work and not ours. True, we cannot substitute nor duplicate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross; however, each one of us is called by Jesus himself to "bear our own cross" (**Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27**). As the Gospels repeat Jesus' refrain five times, we can conclude he was serious! To take up our cross means above all else we are to receive God's breath of courage and gather the guts to love beyond the threshold of reason, public opinion, and comfort. Do that enough times and we shall begin to love lavishly expecting nothing in return. We will be beautiful and become a fresh breeze of life in a culture of death.

Did you know that Elizabeth Taylor refused to ever sit for her portrait to be painted? She had the guts to know that only a different kind of beauty lasts forever.