

“Three Days”

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Based upon Hosea 6:1-3; Acts 9:1-19

A few weeks ago, after Easter, one of you came up to me after worship with a very good question: “Why do we say that Jesus was raised on the third day? If he died on Friday afternoon and was raised on Sunday morning, that seems more like two days than three.” It’s not a trivial issue. According to *Matthew*, before Jesus was crucified, he said that the only sign he would give to the authorities who opposed him was “the sign of Jonah.” “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster,” Jesus said, “so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” (Matt. 12:39-40). In the other gospels, Jesus was not quite as detailed but still said repeatedly that he would rise on “the third day.” Add to that prophesy the additional fact that people believed in Jesus’ day that you couldn’t really be sure someone was dead until three days had passed, and you can see why the timing of the Resurrection mattered to Jesus’ followers. If he was raised in a day and a half, no one would believe he had really been dead in the first place, and if he was raised in two days, then what about the Jonah prophecy? The disciples’ resurrection stories would have been seen as more suspect, as would have Jesus’s teachings.

It was good news, therefore, for his first followers and for us too, that Jesus did indeed spend three days and three nights in the tomb. He was really dead and then really alive again. But to see that, we have to do the calendar and clock-math in the way that the Jews in Jesus’ day did. In Jewish tradition then and now, a day begins at sundown, not in the morning. Also, in Jewish tradition then, what we would call “the day after tomorrow” was called “the third day.” So, to count three days, you start with today, then tomorrow, then you’re at the third day. Tradition says that Jesus was crucified on a Friday around noon. But in terms of the counting of days and nights, that Friday began at sundown on Thursday. So, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights were the three nights, and the three days were sundown to sundown Thursday to Friday, sundown to sundown, Friday to Saturday, and sundown Saturday into Sunday. Although Jesus wasn’t in the tomb for all of day three, he was there long enough to be counted as really dead, and did rise on “the third day,” as he said he would.

If that was all that we could learn from the “three day” expression in Scripture, however, then I wouldn’t be preaching on it. The reason I’m preaching on it is that there is actually much more to “the third day” and/or “three days” expression in Scripture than the timing of Jesus’ Resurrection. If you search for that phrase in the Bible, as I did this past week, you will find that it appears again and again at key moments in the unfolding of God’s story of the redemption of humankind. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw Mount Moriah where he thought he had to sacrifice Isaac, until God provided him a ram instead. (Gen. 22:4). On the third day, Pharaoh released the cupbearer from his death sentence, as Joseph had predicted he would when he interpreted the cupbearer’s dream by saying “three branches stood for three days.” (Gen. 40:12). Years later, also on a third day, Joseph released his brothers from prison in Egypt, finally reconciling with them after having framed them as thieves. (Gen. 42:17-18).

Generations later, when Joseph's descendants became enslaved, Moses begged Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go a three-day's journey into the desert, (Gen. 3:18), and on their third day after escaping Pharaoh and crossing the Red Sea, the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai to give the people the Ten Commandments. (Ex. 19:16-19). On the third day, Joshua and the people of Israel crossed the Jordan river into the Promised Land. (Josh. 1:11; 3:2). On the third day, good King Hezekiah was healed by God of a fatal disease. (2 Kings 20:5). On the third day, Esther put on her royal apparel and risked her life to ask her husband/king to spare her people. (Esther 4:16; 5:1). On the third day of being in the belly of a fish, Jonah was given new life when the creature threw him up on the shore. (Jonah 1:17.)

Today, to add to that list, we heard that the apostle Paul was blinded by the risen Christ for three days. On the third day, Ananias restored his vision, enabling him to begin his new ministry in Christ's name. We also heard in *Hosea*, the people of Israel responding to the prophet's calls for change by saying that they knew God would raise them up on the third day too. What are we to make of all of these references? When numbers appear in Scripture repeatedly it is more than a coincidence or basic chronology. The numbers aren't magic, but they are shorthand for various theological concepts. For example, as I've said many time, forty days in the Bible means not a month and ten days literally, but a really long time. Forty years means a generation's worth of time. The number twelve reflects God's blessing, from the twelve tribes to the twelve disciples. The number seven reflects God's completeness, from the seven days it took for God to make Creation according to *Genesis*. And the number three reflects God's very self, for we worship a Triune God. Three stands for perfection, for permanence, for wholeness. Three is like the fingerprint of God.

Building off of that idea of three being God's signature, stories that record something taking three days, or happening on the third day, are stories about divine intervention. In the Bible, people end up stuck in the wilderness for any number of reasons. But if it's a three-day journey, or a third day promise, then we, the readers, can trust that the character in the story is working on God's time, and whether he or she knows it, somehow in accordance with God's plan. Three days, therefore, symbolizes the time it takes for God to change the story for the better, for new life to begin and promises to be kept. It is the incubation period for God's redeeming grace. This is not to say that God can't work faster than that. Jesus demonstrated through his healing ministry that God could heal someone in an instant. But the three-day lessons convey something more than healing has happened. There has been a shift in the person's relationship with God and others that has theological significance. There has been a divine act of redemption.

We see that shift in Paul's story today. Before his Damascus road experience, he was zealous for the Lord in the worst possible way. He was so convinced of the righteousness of his faith that he persecuted Christians for theirs, even to the point of holding people's coats when they were stoning Stephen, and chasing Christians like a bounty hunter beyond the confines of Jerusalem. The risen Christ stopped him in his tracks on one such quest, saying, "Why are you persecuting me?" Then, rather than accept Paul's answer in that moment, or assume that he

would be transformed simply by being asked the question, like a good therapist Jesus made Paul ask himself the question over a three-day period of blindness. Before he could see the world differently, he needed to stop seeing the way he always had. He needed to die to his old self and be reborn. So, Jesus gave him his own mini-tomb experience, three days to stare at the darkness and contemplate the new and better way God had revealed to him and would make known through him. When he was ready to accept that way, God intervened again through Ananias, to open his eyes.

Now it isn't a part of our faith tradition to believe that we all need to be blinded for three days too, in order to believe in or benefit from Christ's resurrection, or to serve Jesus faithfully. But I do believe that throughout our lives we, like our ancestors in the faith before us, experience third-day transformations of our own by God's grace. These moments may take more than three actual days and night to arrive, but speaking metaphorically, they follow the same pattern. They begin at night, which is to say in times of darkness when we feel like we or something are emotionally, physically, or spiritually lost or hurting. They go on long enough that, like the disciples felt after Jesus was crucified, we feel that our pain, confusion, or loss is permanent. And they end when with the help of God's healing, redeeming grace, we are able to die to some aspect of ourselves or our lives, and allow God to make us new.

Pastor/author Nadia Bolz-Weber has written about her three-day experience, although not in those words. She was a drunk and an addict who had left the fundamentalist faith of her parents behind in favor of life-threatening partying and self-abusive practices. But through the grace of God, she started to feel pulled to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which then led to her discovering her spiritual gifts for ministry, and ultimately, to her falling in love with God and becoming a minister herself. Writing about her experience later, she said, I felt "like I was on one path toward self-destruction and God pulled me off of it by the scruff of my collar, me hopelessly kicking and flailing and saying, 'Screw you. I'll take the destruction please.' God looked at tiny, little red-faced me and said, 'that's adorable,' and then plunked me down on an entirely different path."¹ It was a path she fought against taking initially. But in the end, it transformed her, and led her to believe that "the Christian faith...is really about death and resurrection. It's about how God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pull us out, giving us new life, in ways dramatic and small."²

Not everyone has a three-day redemption experience like she did and Paul did. Not everyone is redeemed in order to go into ministry either. But I agree with Bolz-Weber that the Easter good news about death and resurrection isn't just about Christ, it's about us too; as he was raised on the third day, so are we, and not just when we die. Moreover, I suspect that if you think about your life, you can identify third-day moments in it with the benefit of hindsight. Many of you here know what it's like to travel a three-days' journey between the loss of a loved one—a spouse, a parent, a child—and the time when you finally begin to live your life fully without them. Many know what three days in the tomb feels like from having an illness, injury, or

¹ Bolz-Weber, Nadia, Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 40.

² *Ibid* at xvii-xviii.

addiction that forces you to give up life as you know it, in order to find the new entirely different way of life God created for you and truly live it with joy. Three-day experiences don't have to consume your whole life at once. You can have a three-day experience in your career at one stage of your life, and one in parenting or your personal life at another, and one in your body or your health as still another. It's a third day whenever one chapter closes and a new one, steeped in unexpected grace, arrives. With God's help, we die and rise again over and over again throughout our lifetimes.

So, if you are stuck on day one or two now in your life, so aware of endings that you cannot see or even believe a new beginning is possible, then the Good News of the Gospel is that the third day is coming. I can't tell you when—the math is not that precise. But as it came for Christ and so many before him, it will come for you because nothing in this life beyond God's power to redeem, and if history is any witness, God gets a particular kick out of third-day saves. Try not to lose faith or hope in the meantime. Instead use your time in darkness to reflect on the questions, "What is it that I need to let go of now? What chapter is closing in my physical, spiritual, or emotional life so that a new one can begin?" You can't get to the third day come without truly letting go. The *Hosea* text makes this clear. In the reading we heard, the people of Israel are saying all the right things. "Come let us return to the Lord," they say. "After two days he will revive us, and on the third day he will raise us up." But then they confuse their liturgy with the Baal fertility liturgy, showing that they aren't really ready to let go of their idolatrous ways, ready to die to the old ways and embrace the new. Hosea recognizes this when, speaking for God, he says in response, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early." To get to the third day requires sincerity, patience, growth, and letting go. It requires surrender to God's timing and God's way.

According to an old story, which may or may not be true, Martin Luther was once so upset by something that had gone wrong in his life that he spent three days in deep depression. On the third day, his wife, Katharina von Bora, came downstairs dressed in black mourning attire. "Who's dead?" Luther asked her morosely. "God," she replied. "What do you mean, 'God is dead?' God cannot die," he said. "Well," his wife replied, wiser in that moment than he, "the way you've been acting I was sure he had!"³ Sometimes we need reminders that God is not dead, and that therefore we always have the possibility of new life through God's grace. The good news of Easter is such a reminder. Jesus rose on the third day. Although he really was dead, by the redeeming grace of God he now lives, and so shall we. Three days can feel incredibly long when you spend them in a tomb, or a prison, or in a desert. But look at it this way, it's a whole lot better than forty years. Within our own lifetimes, God gives us new life again and again. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ *Animating Illustrations*, "Three days", HOMILECTICSONLINE, retrieved April 30, 2019 from https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=third day