

5th Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-57; Romans 8:6-11.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 is the best-known passage in the book of Ezekiel – the Prophecy of the Dry Bones. In this prophecy, God shows the prophet a valley of the dry bones of an army who, when the Word of the Lord comes upon them as a great breath, both come together and come alive as a resurrected army. It is a most dramatic parable. But that is both its greatest asset and its greatest liability, because it is so dramatic that it overwhelms all the otherwise profound insights of Ezekiel that appear throughout his book.

In reality, the Prophecy of the Dry Bones cannot be fully appreciated except within its larger context. Chapters 36 through 39 make up one notable statement of hope that appears in this otherwise critical book regarding Judah's political, economic and religious systems. Ezekiel's primary emphasis is that Israel's kings, court, business leaders and priests have conspired together over hundreds of years to build their mutual power and wealth by dominating, exploiting and seducing the people. In doing so, Ezekiel stressed that Judah's systems are no longer being faithful to the Deuteronomic standards for a nation that is the shalom community, acting justly, sharing wealth equitably, eliminating poverty and building a people deeply in relation with God and each other. Consequently, Ezekiel repeatedly predicted that destruction was going to come upon Judah both in the form of conquest from without (e.g., 21:1-32) and by decay from within (e.g., 22:23-31).

Such a prophecy presents a bleak and even hopeless vision to both the people and the powers of Judah. Consequently, in chapters 36 through 39, Ezekiel presents a ray of hope for the restoration of the nation. In chapter 36, Ezekiel tells about God's blessings upon a sobered Israel, restored to the land of Palestine after exile in Babylon. Ezekiel's promise is that Israel will once again become a prosperous and large people. They are restored, however, not because they are good, not because they are repentant, not even because of their obedience, but because of the grace of God.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations in which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes” (36:22-23).

The transforming and salvific work God will do within and to the Israelites is beautifully presented by Ezekiel:

“I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (vss. 24-28).

It is intriguing to note what God will do and in what order. God will:

- ?Gather Israel from the nations;
- ?Wash them of their uncleanness;
- ?Remove from them their heart of sin;
- ?Place a godly heart within them;
- ?Put a godly spirit within them.

By so doing, God will transform Israel so that they will thus be empowered to live in a godly manner before Yahweh and in a just and equitable manner before each other and the world!

God gathers, God cleanses, God removes the attraction of injustice, domination, greed and the use of unilateral power (i.e., sin), God places a new heart and will within them (i.e., the desire to act justly, equitably and lovingly in their political, economic, social and religious life as a nation), and God fills with God's Spirit (in order to enable them to continue to live justly). This is a beautiful statement of God's work in social reform. And therefore, it is a beautiful statement of God's work of redemption. God is not expecting Israel to live a godly life for which they have shown themselves incapable. Rather, God will work in them to remove their lust for power, greed and domination and to transform them into right acting. And only when that miracle has taken place within them are they capable of following God's law.

Who says the Old Testament isn't built upon grace?

Chapter 37 consists of two prophecies – one being the prophecy of dry bones (37:1-14) and the other a prophecy of the two sticks (37:15-28). The prophecy of the two sticks tends to be overshadowed by the dry bones prophecy, because it is not as dramatic. But it is equally important.

In this prophecy, Ezekiel is instructed to take two sticks. One he is to label "Judah" and the other "Ephraim" (Israel). He is to then hold them in such a way that they appear to be one stick. The actual prophecy states, "Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms" (37:21-22).

The prophecy, then, is about the reunion of the two nations. They will no longer be divided. Rather, when the people of Israel are restored to the land, they will be one people – one nation. And whenever they are on that land, they will be one people.

Ezekiel then paints a remarkable picture of what life will be like in the unified nation under a single monarchy. He writes, "They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant, Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of shalom with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be

my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (37:25-28).

The promise is not simply that of political union under a son of David, but of a nation which is united under God. God will dwell among them, and that will make them his people. Because God is there, they will be blessed and know peace and security. But the real investment in them will be God’s presence. It is God’s presence that will truly turn them into a nation. This is the powerful promise of Ezekiel to a defeated and decimated people.

Ezekiel 38:1 through 39:29 concludes this section of hope proclaimed by the prophet for Israel’s future. Chapters 38 and 39 describe a coming great invasion of Israel which will occur after their restoration to the land. Gog, king of Magog and chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, will assemble a great army of his nation and of many other nations (Persia, Ethiopia and Egypt) so that this great horde can invade Israel.

“On that day when my people Israel are living securely, you will rouse yourself and come from your place out of the remotest parts of the north, you and many people with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army; you will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the earth. In the latter days I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I will display my holiness before their eyes” (38:14b-16).

Once Gog invades Israel, however, he will never engage their army in battle. As they invade, a great natural disaster comes from God upon that army (its description in 38:19-20 sounds like a massive earthquake and resulting volcanic eruption – which is not that impossible to envision, in that this portion of Israel lies along the northern ridge of the Great Rift Valley). That cataclysm will decimate the army of Gog, and will annihilate it. So great will be the annihilation that the wood from their weapons will be used by Israel for fuel for seven years, so that no tree will need to be cut down for that entire period (39:9-10). So great will be the destruction of the army of Gog that it will take seven months to find and bury all the bodies of Gog’s soldiers rotting on the land (39:11-16). This great destruction of the world’s mightiest army assembled to war on little Israel will occur in order that “I will display my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God, from that day forward” (39:21-22).

In the conclusion of chapter 39 (verses 21-29), Ezekiel then summarizes his message of hope by stating that the exile was punishment for Israel because of their refusal to live their national life under the covenant with God. They had not lived out the shalom to which they had been called as a nation, for they had not practiced justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and the building of the nation into a relational culture. But the promise, symbolized in the destruction of the armies of Gog, is that they will both be restored to the land and will live as a nation of shalom.

“Therefore thus says the Lord God: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name” (39:25).

The intentions of God's activity toward Israel are very clear. The response God expects from Israel, after the defeat of Gog and Israel's restoration, is also quite clear. This chapter and, consequently, the entire section, conclude with these words: "Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind; and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God" (39:28-29). Thus does this section of the book of Ezekiel end with God's promise to "never again hide (his) face from them" but rather to "pour out (God's) Spirit upon the house of Israel" as they build God's community of justice, equity and a loving relationship with each other and with God!

It is in the light of this promise throughout these chapters that one can set into its proper context the famed Prophecy of the Dry Bones. In this prophecy, Ezekiel comes upon a former battlefield littered with the dry bones of the combatants. God commands him to call the bones together. He does, and the bones join together and form dead human beings. God then commands Ezekiel to call the winds to come from the four corners of the world and enter into the army. He does, and they come alive – "they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude".

The lesson of this prophecy is quite clear, and is the best of news for Israel. "Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act", says the Lord" (37:12b-14).

The lesson of the dry bones is that, because of God's love, God will restore the exiled, defeated Israel and will return them to their land as a free people. There, they will embrace the covenant with God, so that they will seek the shalom of their nation by "doing justice, loving each other tenderly and walking humbly with their God" (Micah 6:8). Thus, this entire section, from the 36th through the 39th chapters of Ezekiel, give the Israelites living in Babylonian exile hope – for God will restore Israel to their land, defend them from all external threats, will pour God's grace upon them and will thus enable them to become the nation as God intended them to be – a nation of justice, equity and in relationship with God!

Psalm 130 is a hymn of lamentation for an unnamed tragedy that has come upon Israel. But it is also a hymn of victory, for it concludes with the command and call, "O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love" (vs. 7). As such, it is appropriate to be read in conjunction with the message of Ezekiel, not only in the prophecy of the dry bones, but for any passage within chapters 36-39.

Psalm 130 is a rich psalm that captures God's work in us and in our midst. It begins, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my cry! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (130:1-2)!

The psalmist acknowledges the unfathomable mercy of God in verses 3 and 4. If God were to "keep score" of our misdeeds – whether as individuals or as a nation (a community) – no one and

nothing would be acceptable to God. But acceptance by God does not depend upon our making ourselves acceptable. It is based solely upon the steadfast love and forgiveness of God.

In that light, the instructions of the Psalmist are twofold. First, “wait for the Lord” (vss. 5-6) – that is, wait for his merciful intervention in our lives and in our nation. Second, “hope in the Lord” (vss. 7-8) – that is, live in an attitude of expectation for God’s intervention and the acting out of God’s steadfast love!

Wait! Hope! This is the essence of authentic response to God. Whether as a community or as an individual, live your life in expectation of what God will do in and through you and/or in your situation. And you can live in such expectation, “waiting” and “hoping”, because you know that God is not a vindictive deity but is rather one who loves you and your people more than you love yourself. So Psalm 130 tells us to “wait” upon the Lord and to “hope” in his work in our situation, trusting that God will do what is best in that situation!

John 11:1-57 is the story of Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. It divides neatly into three parts: 11:1-27 which sets the stage most profoundly for the miracle; 11:28-44 which tells the resurrection story, and 11:45-57, which records the response of the Jewish ecclesiastical elite to the event and its consequences for Jesus’ campaign.

The earliest events of this story are all preamble, leading us to the heart of the chapter – verses 21-27. The text introduces Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha (vss. 1-2), reporting the brother’s illness. Verses 3-6 report Jesus’ refusal to go immediately to care for his ailing friend. Verses 7-16 record Jesus’ conversation with his disciples, refusing to leave until he is sure Lazarus is dead. Finally, verses 17-20 tell us of Jesus’ arrival near Bethany four days after the death of Lazarus. After four days in the tomb, Lazarus is clearly “good-and-dead”. It is there that Martha confronts this supposed friend of Lazarus who wouldn’t come when he could have been of genuine help. Thus begins, with this confrontation of Jesus by Martha, the central point of the entire story.

“Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”” (11:21-24).

The sequence is intriguing. Martha chastises Jesus (even while expressing some naïve, uncertain hope) for his having taken so long to have arrived. In essence, she is questioning his friendship with Lazarus and his caring for her and her sister, Mary. Jesus responds with what is clearly a banal but appropriate statement that many Jews would make at funerals. “Your brother will rise again”. This remark clearly angers Martha who dismisses the statement with, in essence, a response that says, “I know my theology. You don’t have to feed me this banal line. Why weren’t you here to help?” Jesus’ response is not to answer either her charge or her sarcasm. What he does do is to make one of the most important statements in the Gospel of John and clearly the central teaching of this story.

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”” (11:25-26)

Jesus makes three distinct and yet related statements and asks one question – not only of Martha but of the reader and of the Christian community, as well. It is as follows:

- ? “I am the resurrection and the life”.
- ? “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live”.
- ? “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”
- ? “Do you believe this?”

First, “I am the resurrection and the life”. This is another “I AM” statement – “Yahweh is the Resurrection and the Life!” Resurrection is not some condition of one’s body, some fact of reality, some event that will happen at a later date. Resurrection is a person! Resurrection is the very essence of God. And I am God! Consequently, I am your hope for resurrection and life.

Second, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live”. Jesus is saying to Martha, but in a larger sense to all his readers and to the Christian community, “If you confess Jesus as your Lord, you will be persecuted, you will be mocked, you will be dismissed and, in fact, some of you will even be killed. But although you will receive all the rejection Jesus has received, you – the community of faith, the revolutionary movement – all that you stand for, will live. Thus, in a profound sense, you will continue to live, as well.

Third, “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Yes, you will “die” for Christ and His Kingdom! But you will never die. Death cannot separate those who follow Jesus from the community of faith. And death cannot separate the disciples from God incarnate (Jesus) and God in the heavenlies. Death cannot come between us and God. And why? Because Yahweh – God incarnated in Jesus – is Himself resurrection and life!

Fourth, “do you believe this?” Do you believe this, Martha? Do you believe this, Church? This is what it comes down to. Do you believe this? If you believe this, then you have become an unstoppable force for the transformation of the world through Christ. You have become unstoppable because you can no longer be intimidated by anything the political, economic or values-maintaining systems of the dominant culture can threaten to do to you. Both as a community and as an individual, you have become an uncompromising, unintimidatable revolutionary. And you will eventually conquer in the name of Christ – even if the systems kill you! You and the gospel will live on.

But if you don’t really believe this to the depths of your soul, then you are ultimately a “weak reed” upon whom God can never truly depend.

So it all comes down to one thing. “Do you believe this?” The answer is up to you – both as an individual and as the Christian community! How will we truthfully answer?

The second portion of John 11 – verses 28-44 – deal with the actual return of Lazarus to life. It begins by telling us that, as Jesus approaches the tomb, he is emotionally wrought.

“When Jesus saw (Mary) weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. . . . Jesus began to weep” (11:33, 35).

The Gospel writer then tells us, “Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb” (11:38). The word translated “disturbed” is a very powerful Greek word, originating from the snorting of a war-horse. It is a word much stronger than its translation into English. It means deep anger, substantive and justifiable outrage. The second word “moved” connotes profound fear. Both together depict a Jesus who is profoundly moved, deeply disturbed and in emotional pain. What is he so upset about? It can’t be over the death of Lazarus, because he knows that he is about to bring Lazarus back to life again. So why is Jesus snorting like a war-horse? Wes Howard-Brook suggests the reason, in his brilliant commentary on the Gospel of John,

“Jesus’ feelings and tears come not from grief at the face of death but at the *unbelief* that accompanies it. The traditional mourning practice, the disappointment about Jesus’ absence, even the hope for an eschatological resurrection all bespeak an unwillingness or inability to believe that death does not have the last word. Jesus *is* life, but all those around him see nothing but the finality of death. After everything he has said and done, both these dear friends and the Judeans have missed the basic message of his incarnation: that the God who creates and sustains all that has come to be is fully present in the one some proclaim as Christ”.¹

So, grieving in his spirit over the unbelief of all who surround him – friend and foe alike – Jesus arrives at the tomb. He commands the stone to be taken away, prays to God in a way that says to the crowd, “Pay attention and learn”, and then cries out, “Lazarus, come forth”. And shuffling out of the tomb comes Lazarus, still wrapped in the grave clothes in which he was buried four days earlier.

Then a curious thing happens. Jesus instructs the people, “Unbind him and let him go” (vs. 44). Lazarus, in essence, steps out of his binding as he is unwrapped from the grave clothes. Resurrection is, in essence, incomplete until the people participate in it. They must assist the resurrected Lazarus to be fully set free and thus reclaim his life. Jesus raised him from the dead. But it is the people who unwrap him and set him free! Thus is the role of the Church.

And what was it from which they were to unwrap the resurrected man? It was the grave clothes, the traditional garb in which each dead Jew was wrapped in that day. Lazarus couldn’t be freed until he had been freed from the stultifying traditions and limited thinking of his people. That over which Jesus so greatly grieved and brought such “disturbance” to him (11:33, 38) had to be “unwrapped” from the people if they were to let the “dead” be resurrected and walk free again. Their unbinding of Lazarus could allow for their unbinding, as well – and *all* could go free!

But the story doesn’t end there. It must move on to 11:45-57 – the third part of the story. This act of resurrection is such a powerful indicator that Jesus is indeed who he says he is, that not only do many people believe, but even some of the Judeans – some of the priests and Pharisees are converted to him (11:45). Jesus has now invaded the enemy camp!

¹ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), p. 262.

Alarmed, the Sanhedrin meets to determine what to do with Jesus. Their conversation is most revealing. “So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Council (i.e., the Sanhedrin) and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation”” (11:47-48).

This is a very telling statement. In public, the Pharisees and priests have opposed Jesus because he has supposedly broken the Sabbath and thus disobeyed the Law. In other words, in public their opposition to Jesus has been on religious grounds – that he is a heretic and likely quite mad! But here, when they are only with each other, with the doors closed and they are in confidential council together, the truth comes out! They are not opposed to Jesus for religious reasons. They are opposed to him for political reasons.

The leaders of Israel want to remain in power and in control of the Jewish nation, and this they can do only through a *rapprochement* with Rome. But that contract with Rome depends upon their keeping of the peace and their capacity to control the people for the mutual political and economic advantage both of themselves and of Rome. In this passage, they openly admit this to each other and thus perceive Jesus as a threat – a very grave threat that will upset that carefully honed political balance. Their fear is that the people will rebel. Then “the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place (i.e., the Temple, which is the symbolic seat of the priests’ authority and control) and our nation”. Jesus has become a profound threat to the Judeans’ control!

What are they to do about it? Caiaphas, the high priest, in the only lines he speaks in the Gospel of John, states clearly what is to be done. “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:49b-50).

The solution – the only solution – is the obvious solution. Jesus must be killed! Only his death can truly eliminate the threat. Jesus must be erased from the earth!

Caiaphas articulates what all of them know to be true – for no one opposes his shocking sentence of death. Charges against Jesus have to be trumped up, he has to be brought to trial on charges serious enough to get him executed, his execution must be shared by the Roman government, and that execution must be for political reasons (i.e., treason) rather than religious ones (i.e., blasphemy) in order to protect the control the religious establishment has over the people. Jesus must die! Thus, the power of the systems is here begun to be organized to destroy the “Son of Man”!

It is particularly interesting to note how Caiaphas justifies this systemic abuse of power. He says, “It is better for you (i.e., the Sanhedrin) to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed”. The Greek word translated “people” is the word “laou” – from “laos”, “the people”. The word translated “nation” is “ethnos”. Caiaphas’ choice of words is intriguing – and captures a profundity that he himself does not perceive or understand. That is why the writer adds, “He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that

Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (11:51-52).

What Caiaphas was obviously seeking to communicate to the Sanhedrin was this: “It is in our self-interest (i.e., the protection of our power and control) that Jesus be killed. It is better for one man to die than for the systems of that nation (i.e., the *ethnos*) to fall out of favor with Rome and be eliminated by the Roman army”. His concern was only to protect himself and the Jewish political/economic/religious system that had been organized to gain a *rapprochement* with Rome that would guarantee both the nation’s continuance and the protection of the power of those systems.

But what he actually said was that it was better for Jesus to die for “the *laos* – the people” – not “the *ethnos* – the nation”. Jesus had to die sacrificially for the people of Israel and the peoples of the world, so that those who would believe in him (11:25-26) could be drawn into one “children of God” who were “dispersed” throughout the world. Thus, Caiaphas was bearing witness to the inevitable creation of a people of God that would go far beyond Israel into all the world, and that this people would come together – not around the Mosaic Law – but around the sacrificial death of this one man. Thus, by their effort to stop Jesus’ peaceful overthrow of the Jewish systems, the Sanhedrin would guarantee their being supplanted by a liberation movement that would straddle the world. And this Caiaphas spoke “not on his own, but being high priest that year, he prophesied”!

God was even going to use the most wicked plans of the chief representative of the systems that were oppressing and exploiting the people to overthrow those very systems and to create a new “nation” of “people” who would become a “dispersed children of God” reforming the whole world!

So it was that, through his actions, Jesus now became a “dead man walking”, as the Roman and Jewish systems closed in for the kill!

Romans 8:6-11 could almost stand as the theological articulation of the contrast between the Jesus who raised Lazarus to life and the religious-political system that intended to condemn Jesus to death. The Pharisees, Sadducees and priests had “set the mind on the flesh” and thus “set the mind on death”, whereas the liberating Jesus “set the mind on the Spirit” that led to “life and peace” for Lazarus and all those who believed in Jesus’ power to defeat death enough to unloose Lazarus from his grave clothes and set him free.

Thus, Paul postulates in this epistle lesson, “For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (vss. 7-9). Be fixated on maintaining domination and power and control, seek to remain at the political and economic peak, and you will end up “hostile to God” and to all God intends for humanity. You “do not submit to God’s law”; consequently, “you cannot please God”. But if, on the other hand, you remain centered in “Christ and his kingdom”, in setting free humanity from the constraints of greed and power and domination so that they can embrace

equity, justice and a loving relationship with God and each other, you will become people “of the Spirit, because the Spirit of God dwells in you”! Jesus and the Spirit, Paul is declaring, are one in purpose and power. And when you, as a Christian, join your life and actions with that purpose and power, you become one with them as well.

Thus, “if Christ is in you, though your body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (vss. 10-11). If the spirit of Jesus who could raise Lazarus from the dead also dwells in you, then that same spirit can raise you from the dead, as well. For, Jesus proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life; those who believe in me will never die” (John 11:25-26). Therefore, the only question to be asked of us as well as of the people and the priests of Jesus’ day is, “Do you believe this?” (vs. 26). If we base our life, our words and our actions on such belief, then our dry bones will come together, bone to its bone, and the wind of God will come upon them, so that we will live and stand upon our feet, “a vast multitude”, the army of God!

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