

Lent 5 (A)
March 26, 2023
Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

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We have two amazing stories before us today. The raising of Lazarus, the last of Jesus' great signs or miracles in John's gospel. And a much more ancient text from the prophet Ezekiel. It's a beautiful passage that captures the imagination. It's a hopeful image for the people of Israel living in exile under the thumb of Babylon. It's really great that we're hearing these two passages together.

When Ezekiel looks out over the valley of dry bones, those bones represent the failure of what God had been calling Israel to be. Israel was supposed to be a faith community, an economic, legal, political, social community that embodied God's desire for justice for all, a community where the strong would not oppress the weak and the wealthy would not take advantage of the poor. The dry bones represented the failure of justice for the poor and the failure of protections for the vulnerable. By the time the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and led the people into exile, what Israel was supposed to be had been dead for a long time. Who could even imagine reversing such a failure?

So when Ezekiel pictures God raising Israel from their graves, this message is about more than just an ethic community in exile in Babylon returning to their homeland. For Ezekiel, it means that God is making it possible for Israel to be "the people of God," with everything that meant, They would be a light for the nations, so that everyone could see that life with God means being part of a neighborly community where the vulnerable are protected and justice is done, and the bounty of creation is shared so that everyone has enough.

The sad truth, though, is that God's people continue to have a difficult time being this kind of community. When Jesus came on the scene, his message was just like what the prophets of old said. In his day also, Israel was not faithful to its calling to be a bright, shining beacon of God's grace and love specifically because of how the weak and vulnerable were not cared for or protected. When Jesus got into conflict with the religious authorities, the underlying issue was almost always Jesus' concern for the poor. He condemned the Sadducees and the temple priesthood for using the temple to enrich themselves while exploiting the poor. He clashed with the Pharisees, who were supposed to be a reform movement, but Jesus felt their reforms were irrelevant or worse to the things that made life difficult for the poor.

That's why it's so important to hear from the gospel of John this morning. Each gospel has its own way of telling the story of Jesus, and John tells the story of Jesus' ministry with a series of signs and miracles that reveal who Jesus is and what he is all about. Raising Lazarus is the last and greatest sign that Jesus performs. On the one hand, it points ahead to Jesus' own death and resurrection. For Jesus to go to Lazarus' tomb means facing his own painful future that is now only days away. But even more important, when Jesus calls Lazarus out from the tomb, it is a sign that for us to see who Jesus is for us because it shows us God's power over death and Jesus' oneness with God.

This scripture wants us to understand that everything this sign points to is available to us now. Don't imagine that Jesus' resurrection will become meaningful for you only in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus says: I am the resurrection and the life—in the present. And listen carefully to what Jesus says immediately after that: "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." It might sound confusing and contradictory, but the point is we can experience the power of Jesus' resurrection now, even while knowing we are entirely mortal. Jesus can set us free from fear, because he has passed through death into new life and is able to stand with us in every time of need.

This is where the power comes from for the church to stand up for justice, to act with compassion, to advocate for the weak and marginalized in a predatory culture. I'm very aware that throughout the church's long, sad history, the church has forgotten the essential truth about who God calls us to be. Too often the church has been preoccupied with wealth and power. The church has been an instrument of empire, using fear and violence to control people. Far too often, the church has been everything Jesus was not. But in every generation, God's Spirit continues to raise up those dry bones and call forth a community that looks like Jesus' way of love. In every generation, the risen Jesus is with us as the presence of life, even in the midst of death, to stir our hearts and summon us to follow him, to be instruments of God's peace and justice.

This is so important, hearing Ezekiel and John together, because fear is one of the main ways those who benefit from the current arrangement of things shut down any movement to change the status quo. We're currently seeing a backlash against the racial justice movement that exploded after George Floyd's murder. In some states, those who don't want to look at racism, who don't want things to change, are threatening teachers with the loss of their job or jail if they teach children about our nation's real history. We're seeing a backlash against the civil rights gains by the queer community. Those who want gay people to go back to the closet are threatening teachers and rolling back legal protections. Fear is how they gain compliance, how they intimidate everyone into silence in the face of injustice.

But Jesus sets us free from fear because he has broken the power of death, because he is the resurrection and the life. Even when we stand at the gate of death, we are connected to Jesus, who embodies life with God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God because the love of God is with us now, in Jesus, through every dark valley. The glory of God is revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection, which means by faith God's glory is present for us now and in our hour of trial to give us peace and comfort and strength, even joy.

When we are not paralyzed by fear, we will find the courage to act for justice, for compassion, for a change in the status quo. When we know in our bones that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, we won't be paralyzed by fear. And in every generation, God's Spirit is ready to breathe new life and new hope and new purpose into the dry bones of God's people. Thanks be to God. Amen.