

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 26, 2023 – The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45 – Jesus and the Raising of Lazarus
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Revival! That's the theme of this morning's lessons. Our need for revival and God's work of revival.

Let's look first at our Old Testament reading, a famous passage from the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a Jewish prophet and a priest in Jerusalem. He lived during the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and during the years of Babylonian exile. During this terrible period of their history, nearly all that was important in the life of the Israelites was lost. Ezekiel considered questions about the meaning of what had happened. Why did God allow the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple? Why did God allow the exile of God's people to a foreign land? What future was there for Israel? Ezekiel's message was two-fold: God had punished the people for their sin and God's mercy would be revealed through their future restoration to the land of Israel. The passage we heard today – the Valley of Dry Bones – is part of Ezekiel's vision of the restoration promised by God.

Some scholars think that Ezekiel's vision may have been based on the sight of a battlefield filled with the bones of dead soldiers. Or this may have been a purely spiritual vision. The image is frightening, desolate, death persisting through time. As Ezekiel looks at the dry bones, the Lord asks him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" How could a human being imagine life in this valley of death? "O Lord God, you know." Where human vision fails, God's vision and God's power do not fail. "Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live... then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act."

The author of Psalm 130 calls out to God for revival. "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord." These "depths" are most likely a state near death. The psalmist pleads for rescue and for forgiveness of sin, with trust in God and with hope born of that trust. This is personal, individual – "my soul waits for the Lord" – but the psalm moves from personal to communal – "O Israel, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy; with him there is plenteous redemption, and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins."

Finally, we have the account in John's Gospel of Jesus raising Lazarus from death. Jesus was a close friend of the three siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. When Lazarus became seriously ill, his sisters sent word to Jesus, expecting him to come and heal Lazarus' disease before his life expired. But Jesus waited, and Lazarus died. Jesus arrived in Bethany after Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Jesus prayed to his Father, then called, "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus was revived, alive once more.

As you hear this account you may be troubled, as I am, by Jesus' behavior. It seems that he allows Lazarus to die so that he, the Son of God, can be glorified and people will believe in him. Jesus loves Lazarus, but it isn't until he sees Mary's grief that he is himself "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." This picture of Jesus doesn't feel right to me. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is always moved by compassion, ready to heal the sick and relieve human suffering of all kinds.

We need to remember that the author of John's Gospel includes much more interpretation of events than we find in the other Gospels. For him, all of Jesus' miracles – including the raising of Lazarus – are meant to reveal the glory of God. As Jesus said to Martha when she pointed out that her brother had been dead four days, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

John also wants to make sure that we understand that Jesus, the Messiah, went willingly to Jerusalem and his death. After he heard that Lazarus was ill, Jesus "stayed two days longer in the place where he was." Then he decided to go to Bethany, which is two miles outside of Jerusalem, the village where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. When he told the disciples, they said, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Yes, Jesus knew that he was heading for trouble and he went on deliberately. John wants us to understand that Jesus was not arrested and killed because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time out of his love for his friends. Instead we see a picture of the Messiah using divine power in a miracle of love and compassion – raising Lazarus from death – while he was on his way to the place where he would himself face betrayal, violence, and death. We see a Messiah who is indeed always moved by compassion and ready to relieve human suffering in spite of his own suffering.

Revival – our need for revival and God's work of revival – is the theme of these passages from scripture. We have been shown pictures of death and grief and hopelessness. And we have heard testimony to the power of God to bring life and hope in a valley of dry bones and out of a stinking tomb. We read in scripture about this work of the Spirit of God. I am confident that many of us could find the same testimony to the power of God's Spirit if we look at the stories of our own lives. When and where and how have you been desperate for the work of God in your life and how has God's Spirit lifted you out of darkness and strengthened you to go on? Think about how God has revived you and give thanks to God.

Think and pray also about where you need the work of God's Spirit in your life now. Are there heaps of dry bones lying somewhere in your heart and soul that need the saving breath of God? Are you in despair because you need God's forgiveness? Does your soul wait for the Lord with longing? Is there anything within you that is bound in death and needs to hear Jesus' command, "Come out!" Pray that God will act again to revive you, with faith that God is merciful and compassionate.

We can consider the life of this parish in terms of revival as well. There have been desolate times in the history of the parish, yet the parish has revived, by God's grace and the work of faithful people. It might be useful to think about the parish now and wonder where we might need more revival, more renewal. Are there places where we are stuck in old patterns, in selfish preoccupations, in deadly inertia or apathy? How might Jesus be calling us to "come out" and live together as the body of Christ in this place and for the good of God's world?

We are about to rehearse the central story of our faith, beginning on Palm Sunday and going through Easter Sunday. Suffering and death are part of that story. Jesus, the Messiah, does not bypass the worst of human experience. That isn't the Christian message. The Christian message is that the works of darkness and death do not have the last word. God's word is the last word. And God's word and God's action are for life. And not the life of mere revival, wonderful though that is. Resurrection life. Life beyond anything we now know or can imagine. New life, unending life in Christ. That is our hope and our journey's end, by the power of the living God. Amen.