

Sunday, March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

John 11:1-45

Raised to Life

We're in this together. Unprecedented times. Stay home- stay safe. Self-isolation. Social distancing. Take this seriously. Separated gatherings. Flatten the curve. Go home and stay home. These are some of the expressions we have all been hearing through social media- whether it be news broadcasts of the latest local statistics or government leaders sharing the ways in which they will help those in need. There have been warnings given and of course the message of staying safe and healthy has been reiterated over and over again in these last two weeks. We are experiencing something that has not been experienced before- the world is at war with a virus that kills people and we need to prevent its spread to others. We must adhere to the rules laid out before us. Ultimately it is our own health which is first and foremost in our thoughts. You have heard all these things but what affects others away from us does not always have meaning, that is until we see grief in the eyes of people who have lost loved ones to this virus and bodies of people being prepared for burial. Just what are we feeling?

For many people it is grief, traumatic, secondary grief and even grief from within. When we see images of people who are helping people by the hundreds walking in and out of clinics, we see people who are exhausted and numb because of what might occur. What might occur is that those seeking testing are denied because of different factors, there are a limited number of test kits, and some people are not fully showing signs of the illness. They are told to go home and monitor symptoms and if they grow worse come back. And even with these struggles there are other matters being shared- anything from anger, to wanting to remain healthy for the sake of others and questioning of why God would allow this to happen?

We are people- God created us to be in relationship- listening and sharing not just through electronic means or technology, but with real hugs and handshakes and yet all are affected in some way. It is in how we respond that makes the difference! We can be angry that we have to line up and watch social distancing occur or we can experience more grief like many around the world who cannot find solace in traditional funeral rites of loved ones. There is much grief all around us. Not just due to death but to losses. Of special gatherings which should occur: weddings, baptisms, and those events that are anticipated through much planning and organization being cancelled or postponed. I think of the

Olympic athletes who have committed themselves to 4 years of training to be the best at their sport only to have their focus to be moved to later on. They are grieving what could have been. We too are looking at losses—not being with church family members in these last days of Lent which lead to Holy Week and Easter. Yet there is something that we as Christians have and believe that moves us beyond this grief.. It is the gift of life.

The prophet Ezekiel was shown a vision by God and was taken into a valley filled with many human bones. The lives represented by these bones were not only people who once lived, but were people who were disgraced because they were not buried properly. They had been exposed to the elements and scavenging buzzards and all that remained were long dead dry bones. Symbols of lives that once existed but no longer. In this vision, God asks Ezekiel, can these bones live? Ezekiel's response is 'only you know God". For Ezekiel had held on to hope not in people but in God alone. Ezekiel knew that the people of Israel had not been living as God wanted them to live and knew that God could make anything happen. What was God going to do with the bones?

The first prophecy was on the level of the dry bones to hear the word of the God. And in doing this, God spoke life into the bones and they assembled. The second prophecy was to the bones now assembled which would become full again and bring life and strength. God then explains to Ezekiel what this vision was about. Israel was dry and dead. But there had been life before as Israel had been in relationship with God and they believed and followed his teachings. God was now going to restore Israel. What was dead would now be filled with the Spirit and new life. Ezekiel's vision teaches many principles of how God works in revival, that is bring forth new life.

We know that our present circumstances are challenging and changing. Maybe just maybe we are on the brink of a revival where people will want to turn to God as they are wondering what is happening to our world. When we look at this prophecy we must reflect and know that the bones are dead and dry. That we must grieve as we walk among the dead and sick. That we must seek God's word and share it believing that from death comes life. This may only occur if the Spirit works in process. And we must recognize the Spirit and pray for it to move everywhere. We must believe and watch for evidence of God's Spirit working in and through us as we seek God's Spirit working in others. For when we see this, we will know that hope is not lost and we will serve in new ways. But we must believe.

In my discussions, and zoom meetings this week with various groups of people brought together for different reasons, there has been discussion about hope and what this means.

Hope for when this too shall pass and we return to normal. However, I believe that there will be a new normal emerging. And this new normal will be based on relationships and the need for reconnecting and showing and sharing love under conditions that have changed the course of world history. Much like 9/11/2001, our world post COVID-19 will be filled with prevention of disease spreading and there will be a look at what is important to buy and have as essential for our personal well-being and that of the person next to us. We have been and will continue to grieve the losses we have had but we have to remember that there is hope. Hope beyond this world and this is found because of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Our reading from John 11 is the narrative telling of the death of Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha. When Jesus is first told that Lazarus is not well he doesn't run to see him right away. Jesus states, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus waits two days and then he comes to realize that Lazarus has died. He tells the disciples that they are going to see him. They make their way from Jerusalem to Bethany where the sisters and brother lived.

Martha heard that Jesus was coming and boldly left the mourners with Mary and runs to see Jesus. She is filled with grief, anger, wonder, and states, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Yet she also shared her faith, when she says, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

Jesus tells her, "Lazarus will rise again." Martha knew this because she believed that on the day of judgment Lazarus would rise again but this is not what Jesus meant. He said, "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. Jesus then asked Martha a key question: "Do you believe this?" Yes I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God and the one coming into the world."

Martha left Jesus and called to Mary and told her privately that the Teacher wanted to talk with her. Mary left those who had been grieving with her and went out to see Jesus. Those who had been surrounding Mary, thought she was going to the tomb to grieve. But Mary saw Jesus and said, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died. "

Jesus then looked at her crying, at those in the village who were also crying and he was deeply moved. He asked where he was buried. They took him there and then Jesus wept. The people who were there commented differently--see how he loved him. Couldn't he who healed the blind man prevented Lazarus' death?

What brought Jesus' to tears? What brings us to tears? Usually it is because we are crying over a loss. Jesus knew Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They hung out together during the course of his ministry he and the disciples visited Bethany often and ate with this family. He really cared for this man and his sisters and cried. But maybe Jesus also cried for other reasons- yes he could have come sooner and prevented Lazarus from dying. He was ill for a while, and Jesus could have healed him like others. But he stayed where he was for two days more until such time Lazarus did die. Was Jesus fearful of watching his friend die? Or just what did he mean that "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Lazarus was dead. Now what how could he show that this was for God's glory? What did Jesus have in mind? Was he crying because he was saddened by his death, yes, but also because who he was and what he would do next would be an example of what was to come with his own life. He healed others. Now what. When he was at the tomb Jesus told bystanders to take the stone away. Martha objected because there would be a smell- he had died 4 days before. But Jesus didn't let this stop him. He spoke to Martha, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?"

Jesus then looks up and prays- thank you for having heard me. I say this because this crowd standing here needs to know that you sent me. Help them believe. Lazarus come out. Then something totally amazing happened. The man who had been dead 4 days walked out with his bandages around him. Jesus told the crowd unwrap him, and let him go. Those who saw what happened believed.

What did they believe? That Jesus was truly on the edge of glory with this story. Previously he had enabled a blind man to see. Now he had raised a man from death and did so for the purpose of others coming to know him as the Son of God, the Messiah. He raised what was dead alive again. He knew that Lazarus had to die in order that he be raised to life by him.

There are many people in our world right now dying from a disease which is unknown. Globally scientists are seeking answers to curb further symptoms which have led to death and spawns others to be infected. There is no cure right now- only medicine which helps with pain and breathing. But there is one thing we do know. There is faith and prayers continuing around the world all focusing on our need to bring healing. To put people and patients together in moments which will forever change the lives of each person. There are thousands of nurses and doctors helping those to discern whether they have this virus or a cold and there are many more who need this support. How we lived yesterday is no longer possible- on credit, needing too

much, money always available, hoarding some items and social media surpassing the need to connect with others.

There is grief of what was before the pandemic was declared and then being changed and transformed into something new. There is loss of power and control and there is panic and fear. But we who believe have nothing to fear.

It has been said that we are to: Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose. Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. [Suffering leads to death.] (Master Yoda) But we are people of the resurrection. We are followers and disciples of the one who raised to life a man who was dead. We believe in the One who is the resurrection and the life. And we have nothing to fear for it is Jesus who calls to us to believe. To walk with him to the edge of unknown, to not be afraid, to trust him with our lives and to know that no matter what we face, he is with us.

As we continue to be self-isolating, social distancing, and looking to the future, we need to understand that God is with us on this journey we call life. We too have been promised the ultimate gift-eternal life, if we like Martha believe. Do you believe?

Let us pray.

God of hope and love we thank you for Ezekiel's vision of restored life from death. We thank you for Jesus raising Lazarus to life. Help us to understand that in doing this he showed us a glimpse of your Glory. Help us to continue to walk this path to your glory now and throughout eternity Amen.