

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 11:1-45

S.D.G.

Last week Mother Shivaun mentioned three key lessons that should always be considered when writing a sermon; don't preach a story where you are the hero, don't present a research paper and call it a sermon, don't preach about something that does not affect you. There is a fourth, not a lesson as much as a warning, if you write your sermon too early in the week there is a higher probability that world events will conspire so as to make your sermon irrelevant.

Before pandemic became a routine part of our vocabulary Mother Shivaun and I discussed the four key areas of our focus for Lent; they are studying scripture, worship, go and bless, and rest. What seems like years ago we looked at the Lenten readings and decided on topics for each week.

Writing this sermon about worship just a few weeks ago would have been an entirely different experience. A few weeks ago if someone had asked you to describe worship your response would likely, and appropriately, have revolved around Sunday morning in church. Whether you grew up in a Morning Prayer tradition as is common for many life long Episcopalians, or came to this church post 1979 prayer book revision with its emphasis on Holy Eucharist, Sunday in church would still be the focus. Each of us might have our own particular emphasis or focus, for some of us it is the music, the place, the prayers, the community, and maybe someone might even say it is the sermon.

We gather on Sunday in community. It is here that we worship God, hear God's holy word, and share at God's holy table. Since 1842 that has been the case at St. John's. Every Sunday, barring a few snow storms, we gathered in church. That is until two weeks ago, when the protection of our sisters and brothers became more important than our weekly gathering.

So today, if someone asked you to describe worship how would your answer differ from only a few weeks ago?

Would you now reference our virtual gathering of Morning Prayer on YouTube? Would you describe new, revived, or long standing habits that you practice at home? Would you admit to yourself, and maybe even to others, that you will worship again when this is all over?

In "Beloved" Toni Morrison wrote about Baby Suggs, the spiritual leader of a group of ex-slaves. Here is an excerpt of her work:

*Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed... Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman, and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing...*

*After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees towards her.*

*"Let your mothers hear you laugh," she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.*

*Then "Let the grown men come," she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.*

*“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and ground life shuddered under their feet.*

*Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.*

*It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.*

*She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.*

*She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.*

*“Here,” she said, “in this place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet grass. Love it. Love it hard.....”*

*Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.*

In her book “Receiving Jesus” Bishop Budde references Marcus Borg who wrote: Christianity is most fruitfully experienced and understood as a way of life rather than a system of belief. This is true also of worship. Worship is laughing, crying, and dancing so much so that God enters your heart.

We hear this also in John’s Gospel as Martha, and then Mary, cry out to Jesus – if you had been here. Where were you? How could you not be here for our brother, for your friend!

They called out to Jesus in pain, in agony, in anger. They called out to God. And Jesus wept.

‘He has borne our griefs,’ said the prophet Isaiah, ‘and carried our sorrows’ (53.4). Jesus weeps, not with hopeless grief, but with hopeful grief. Grief that may still be bitter, but is full of the hope of God’s grace and love. Grief that can dance in the bare footed grass.

Dem bones, dem bones, bem dry bones.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

The Babylonians had besieged Jerusalem not once, but twice. Living in exile brought despair. Living in exile and hearing of the second siege buried all hope. It was then that Ezekiel was led to the valley of the dry bones.

Dem bones, dem bones, bem dry bones.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

Prophecy to these bones. Tell them that the Lord God will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. Tell them that the Lord God will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know the Lord your God.

Dem bones, dem bones, bem dry bones.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and you shall know the Lord your God.

As God breathed life into human kind at creation, God breaths life into dry bones. Even when we are bone tired, God breaths life into our souls.

Is worship being in church on Sunday morning, it can be. Is worship the Eucharist, it can be. Is worship Morning Prayer, it can be. Is worship sitting in your favorite prayer-chair with a cup of tea, it can be.

Is worship laughing, crying, and dancing on bare feet grass, it most certainly is.

Worship is opening ourselves to the breath of God. Worship is opening our selves to God's presence and laying before God our sins, our anger, our pain, our joy, our hopes, our loves. Worship is finding a time, a space, a place, a moment to invite God into our hearts and saying: "I am loved by God, and I love God."

I am loved by God, and I love God.

Amen,