

Dear Friends,

The Lectionary lessons for the Fifth Sunday of Lent are: Psalm 130, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11: 1-45.

Tension thickens as the Pandemic insidiously spreads. Even the healthy powerbrokers are sheltering-in-place, parents move in and out of exhaustion, and children get bored and frustrated. Sometimes tension overwhelms and group yoga is the prescription, other times quiet time is all we can do to ease the pressure.

So many in the wilderness ask where is God? My belief is that God is always where the crisis is. God is always where the need is. God is in the heroic people who are our health care providers, those risking their health for the sick. God is in the grocery store workers stocking shelves for us, in the truck drivers and delivery companies preserving what is left of our nation's distribution systems.

And God is in that person near you, in your house, your neighbor, across the hall, or across the street. We can all feel alone, even those of us stuck in houses with families, but God is in that person with us or near us. When we have mercy on that person next to us, or when that person has mercy on us, God is in touch with us.

In that moment of mercy, we find a moment of rest – a short, simple, moment of relaxation from worry and tension. We might say that those moments of mercy are really moments of grace, sustenance for our own souls, saving us from the depths. Jesus calls us by name to come out and into abundant life. In Christ, Beverly+

Prayer

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

It is no accident that the raising of Lazarus is paired with the reading from Ezekiel. Jesus' relationship to death is mirrored in Ezekiel's story. Both narratives reveal God's power. When we are grieving, weary, and lacking hope, it may feel like we are gazing on a valley full of bones. A merciful God whose power is infinite, however, creates hope just when it is needed.

Jesus sees beyond death, and with that same God-given vision, Ezekiel sees the bones coming to life again. Jesus, the prophet, who is hounded throughout his teaching and healing life, unappreciated in his hometown, derided and plotted against, grilled for healing on the Sabbath, drives his followers always to a deeper understanding of God.

The prophet Ezekiel, like Jesus, was not admired and fawned over. But he is guided by God's hand and the spirit of the Lord into the place of grieving, that dusty valley where everything is desolation, the bones of God's beloved Israel, the lifeless shards of a ruined nation. He is given a vision painted in stark terms with dry bones and the assumption that all is lost.

We sadly also know that place, a serious pandemic upon us, but we often do not recognize it as a place inhabited by the Spirit and the hand of God. Jesus knew the presence of God's power in that place of grief, and his word of command is the province of utter confidence that "nothing is impossible with God." Jesus stands outside Lazarus' tomb in the place of grieving.

When Ezekiel pronounces the word of the Lord in obedience to God's command to prophesy, the bones rattle. When Jesus cries, "Lazarus, come out!" the dead man rises.

The word of the Lord is the force that brings life out of death, in the stories of the bones and of Lazarus. God speaks and it comes to be. The universe and all that lives came into existence on the power of God's Word. Both the dry bones and Lazarus, the man who has been dead for three days, hear and respond to the Word of God.

Yet, the story shows us that the crowd did not have to believe in order to make Lazarus' appearance possible. Human belief is not the source of the rising. **Jesus' oneness with the God is the source of the rising. Jesus sees beyond death to God's infinitely greater power. He demonstrates with thanksgiving and authority that his vision is true.**

Through just such powerful events, the veracity of Jesus' vision is given to us. We cannot come to them with ready-made belief. Instead, Jesus creates the ability for us to believe by his abiding presence with us when we are caught in the powers of darkness again and again. And, he helps us see that God's Spirit of Love can guide us to a new life. Those who watch and help to unbind Lazarus are given the vision they need.

Many bindings in our world seem impossible to untangle, but every day the word of the Lord frees someone. That is the message of this story. We are left to wonder at Jesus' conviction about God's word, but the evidence of God making good comes from the places we find ourselves when destruction or hopelessness is all around us.

In solidarity with a world where the threat of death is evident with fear of global pandemic couples with all other pieces of despair our human condition experiences, **REMEMBER GOD IN CHRIST APPROACHES THE STENCH OF OUR STRIFE.**

In faithfulness to God's desire to give humanity abundant life, Jesus calls us by name. Jesus does not speak to the dead man, or the brother of the mourners, or the one buried by the community. **Jesus calls to Lazarus by name.**

In Christ, Beverly+