

Sunday, March 26, 2023 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

In today's gospel Jesus reveals his power over death by raising Lazarus from the dead. The prophet Ezekiel prophesies God breathing new life into dry bones. To those in exile or living in the shadows of death, these stories proclaim God's promise of resurrection. In baptism we die with Christ that we might also be raised with him to new life. At the Easter Vigil we will welcome the newly baptized as we remember God's unfailing promise in our baptism.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ and serve you in righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is a promise that Israel as a nation, though dead in exile, will live again in their land through God's life-giving spirit. Three times Israel is assured that through this vision they will know that "I am the LORD."

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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 that I am the LORD."

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

Psalm 130

¹Out | of the depths

I cry to | you, O LORD;

²**O LORD, | hear my voice!**

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my | supplication.

³If you were to keep watch | over sins,

O LORD, | who could stand?

⁴**Yet with you | is forgiveness,**

in order that you | may be feared.

⁵I wait for you, O LORD; | my soul waits;

in your word | is my hope.

⁶**My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch | for the morning,**

more than those who keep watch | for the morning.

⁷O Israel, wait for the LORD, for with the LORD there is | steadfast love;

with the LORD there is plen- | teous redemption.

⁸**For the LORD shall | redeem Israel**

from | all their sins.

Second Reading: Romans 8:6-11

For Paul, Christian spirituality entails living in the reality of the Holy Spirit. The driving force behind our actions and values is not our sinful desire for self-satisfaction but the very Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead and will also raise us from the dead.

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the

Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel: John 11:1-45

Jesus is moved to sorrow when his friend Lazarus falls ill and dies. Then, in a dramatic scene, he calls his friend out of the tomb and restores him to life.

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"

⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Prayers of Intercession

Sustained by God's abundant mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all of creation, saying "Merciful God," and responding, "receive our prayer."

A brief silence.

You have breathed into us the breath of life. Enliven your church. Deepen our partnerships with our companion churches around the globe (*specific synods, dioceses, or congregations may be named*), and bless the work of missionaries who accompany them. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Your spirit brings life to creation. Enliven the natural world and restore ecosystems in need of healing (*local natural places may be named*). Uplift prophetic voices that turn us to the needs of the soil beneath our feet and the air all around. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.** You redeem the world and its peoples. Free us from systems of oppression. Unbind nations and societies from the sins of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Raise up leaders at all levels of government who work to promote the dignity of every human life. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

You weep when we weep. Be present with those who grieve or who are troubled by illness (*especially*). You hear us when we call to you. Deliver us from the depths of our despair, and free us from the worries that bind us. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Your Spirit of life dwells in our assembly. Bless the music ministries of this congregation (*specific ensembles may be named*) and all who lead us in hymns of praise and thanksgiving and in songs of lament and prayer. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

You are the resurrection and the life. Even though we die, we will live. With thanksgiving, we remember all your saints who now live in your eternal love. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your steadfast love and your promise to renew your whole creation; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.

A reflection for this Fifth Sunday in Lent...

The Hope of New Life

Hope overcomes despair for God's people: this is the message of the readings for today. The hope of new life is evident in the story of "dry bones" from Ezekiel. The children of Israel declare their hope is lost. The prophet's experience in the valley of dry bones inspires him to preach renewed hope to the people. Psalm 130 sings of hope in God and God's word. The work of God's Spirit gives hope of new life in Paul's letter to the church at Rome. The Gospel of John tells the hope-filled story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The gospel gives us encouraging words to sustain us through the approaching despair of Christ's passion and brings us to the fulfillment of hope on Easter. Martha's wistful words to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here. . . . But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (John 11:21-22), reflect the hope of God's people in the face of despair, even in the face of death.

Each text encourages hearers to hope in God and God's word. How do Christians experience unfulfilled hope? This is the challenge for those who interpret today's texts for hearers. Israel's woes are not at an end; other psalms tell of struggle and pain; the Christ-believers at Rome are persecuted; Jesus who raises Lazarus from the dead soon dies. And yet hope is fulfilled as Paul proclaims "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). Psalm 46 sings of God's presence in time of trouble. A preview of the hope of the resurrection will sustain believers in these final days of Lent (John 20:17). The Christian's confidence in the resurrection of the dead epitomizes their hope in Christ.

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