

Scripture Readings and Sermon

March 29, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1–14 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After hearing of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. in Chapter 33, Ezekiel's message turns to the promise of restoration, "yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home". (36:8) Because God's name is holy and the people are the people of God, then God will restore them (36:22-23). "I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. ... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you" (36:24-26) What God promises in Chapter 36 become a vision in Chapter 37. It is one thing to know what God promises and another to believe it. The LORD asks Ezekiel "can these bones live?" If the people are going to have faith in Ezekiel's message, Ezekiel had to believe. The vision gave Ezekiel the faith to proclaim with confidence that there would be a day of restoration.

Commentary on Romans 8:6–11 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Paul interprets the "spirit" mentioned by the prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel) as the Holy Spirit which was given through Jesus Christ at Pentecost to believers. As described in Ezekiel, flesh and bone are still dead without the Spirit. For Paul, the Law is given to bridle the flesh and not the Spirit. It is the flesh that is mortal and not the Spirit. Therefore, the flesh and the Law focus on the temporal things of this world which will all end in death. The Spirit focuses on the eternal things of God. By focusing on this world, we turn our back on God and therefore "the flesh is hostile to God". If we focus on God, then God will give us the Spirit to guide us in all righteous actions in this world. It is by and through the Spirit that the Law is fully fulfilled and we live in Christ. It is the Spirit that gives life to the flesh and not the flesh that gives life to the spirit.

Commentary on John 11:1–45 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The story of the raising of Lazarus can be divided into three parts. In the first part (1-16), Jesus uses the news of Lazarus' illness as a teaching moment for the disciples. There is a question of who is Lord of life. The disciples are afraid of the Jewish authorities but Jesus assures them that it is God who chooses when Jesus will die. Then Jesus describes Lazarus' death as simply "fallen asleep". Jesus challenges the view of death as the final end. Death is the sleep of the mortal body which God can wake up. Thomas completely misses this point which foreshadows his problem with the resurrection of Jesus. The second part (17-29) deals with the interaction between Jesus and Martha. In this Mary and Martha story, it is once again Martha that does the talking while Mary stays at home. While the other Gospels have Peter proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah, John gives that honor to Martha (27). The third part (30-45) is the "awakening" of Lazarus. Rather than entering into a discussion with Mary as he did with Martha, Jesus is moved by Mary's grief and asks to see the tomb. For those struggling to believe in difficult times (Martha), Jesus engages them and leads them to hope. For others who are overwhelmed by emotions and suffering (Mary), Jesus' actions bring comfort and healing. Jesus did not explain away Mary's grief but rather wept with her. Then Jesus, again talking to Martha, called for the tomb to be opened and for Lazarus to come forward. On that day, not only was Lazarus raised but Martha and Mary's faith was unbound and set free from fear of death. They will be the ones who will go to Jesus' tomb. This is called the raising of Lazarus or awakening and not resurrection because Lazarus eventually died. When the resurrection comes, we will have eternal life.

Sermon "Can These Bones Live?" (*[Sermon Video](#)*)

As our nation continues to see a rise in COVID19 cases, our economy grinding to a halt, and

gas prices plummet, it is a reasonable question to ask, "Can these bones live?". In the past, some have asked me why I preach lectionary readings which repeat every three years. It is because of times like these that the reading and the events of the time seem to fit perfectly, that keep me reading the lectionary. We are reminded in today's reading that even in the midst of death, there is always the hope of life.

When Jesus received word that Lazarus was gravely ill, he delayed going to visit. Jesus knew his delay would mean Lazarus' death but he needed to reveal something to the disciples that would soon need to know. Before this, Jesus had always showed up to make everything better from Peter's mother-in-law to the woman who suffered from internal bleeding. The focus seemed to be on healing and teaching about right actions. Jesus was coming to the point when he would be crucified and there would be no healing and everything wouldn't be better. The disciples would have to find faith in the face of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus needed to shift the conversation from physical health and life to spiritual health and life. For Jesus, Lazarus' body was dead but his spirit was alive which is why he said that Lazarus had simply fallen asleep. True life is found in the spirit since all flesh will eventually die. This is the point that Paul was making in Romans. As we watch our physical world thrown into uncertainty, can we find life and hope in the spirit?

After a delay of four days, Jesus finally travels to Bethany to the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Martha is the first to meet Jesus and demand action. When faced with loss and uncertainty, there are some who retreat into themselves to "lick their wounds" while others attack the problem and demand answers. Martha took the latter approach and Jesus met her head on. Jesus confronted her demand to "do something" with a counter question about Martha's own faith and belief. God has a way of getting to the bottom of our problems even when we bluster and blow. If these times we are in are challenging your faith and you demand answers, do not be surprised if God ends up put a mirror to your own fears, doubts, and despairs. God answer is often very simply, "Do you trust your God?"

Mary, on the other hand, was hurting deeply. Her statement to Jesus is not a question of faith but a plea born out of pain. Notice that Jesus doesn't ask her questions or challenge her faith like the friends of Job. Instead, Jesus walks to the grave with her and weeps. When we are most vulnerable, God is a safe shelter in the storm. There is no judgment but rather a peace in the midst of pain. There is an old Jewish saying that "God counts the tears of a woman" and in Israel you can buy a "tear jar". For all those who feel isolated, depressed, and in pain during this pandemic, God is with them if they dare to reach out. No judgment, simply grace. As you read this, do you feel more like Mary or Martha? Both are okay for Jesus was with them both.

Ezekiel was a lot like Martha when Jesus told them to roll away the stone. Ezekiel had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the collapse of the people's faith. God said that God would gather them together again and breath a new spirit into them but Ezekiel still had doubts. Like Martha who said that Lazarus was beginning to stink, Ezekiel was unsure if the bones of Israel could live again so God gave him a vision. A vision of how the word of God could bring the people together and how the Spirit of God could bring new life. That Word spoke to Lazarus and told him to come out. That Word also told the people to unbind his spirit and let him free. The Word shared and the Spirit given has the ability to transform death into life. How many people sheltered in place are like Lazarus? How many people need to hear a word of hope? In the midst of doubt, despair, and fear, can the Body of Christ embody faith, hope and love? While I do my best to insure that not more than 10 people are in the sanctuary at one time and that people are "socially distanced", I think that it is exactly in times like these that the doors of a church should remain open. Like George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life" keeping the doors of the Savings and Loan during the 1929 Crash, as long as we can we will keep the church doors open. If for no other reason than to be a outward symbol of faith, hope, and love during these times of uncertainty. Can these bones live, with God help - YES!