



Sermon for Lent 5, 2020 Choosing God's Gift of Life

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Psalms 130](#)

[Romans 8:6-11](#)

[John 11:1-45](#)

Out of the depths we call to you, O Lord; Lord, hear our voice.
We wait for You; in your Word is our hope. Amen.

Dear friends, This is a frightening time. I feel it, too. Watching news unfold of the continuing movement of this disease across the world, it is hard not to feel the sense of anxiety, uncertainty, concern, fear. And, it's hard, not being able to do much, except shelter and protect each other from exposure. It's worrisome, not knowing our own status – have we been exposed, have we exposed others? It's challenging, not knowing what's next or how this will play out. I feel it, too.

And yet, even in the midst of this, I'm seeing signs that people are continuing to seek and find life, and liveliness.

People have posted fun and ridiculous things. I laughed with a short video someone posted of a dog up on top of the upper kitchen cabinets, high out of reach, and the printed words on the screen saying what the dog is thinking – "I have already been on four walks today with you. I'm not going out again!" I loved the personal video a young priest (a prior student of mine) posted as she danced an Irish jig on St. Patrick's Day. We, like others, have posted and shared cooking adventures with strange ingredients, and documented moments of cleaning and organizing frenzy in our homes that we otherwise never get to. People are giving us bits of silly humor, like listing "top five" coronavirus songs – like "My Corona" (My Sharona) or "Don't Stand So Close to Me." There's also been a fun churchy meme posted around Facebook in the last couple days: "This is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented!"

Thank God for our humor, our good will, our care for one another, and our strength to step forward and choose life. There is that passage from Deuteronomy, "See, I have set before you life and death. Choose life!" Each day, every day, as we rise, let this be our reminder, and our prayer. "God, I thank you for this day, yet another day to live. I choose life, Lord. I choose to embrace this day as the gift you have laid before me."

And yet, we cannot escape this lingering, lurking anxiety, this sense of dread and uncertainty and fear that is with us everywhere now. Life has become different – very quickly. And this unknowing is just plain taxing on our spirits. This lurking anxiety weighs heavy on our hearts and minds.

There could not be better readings for this time than what comes up for us during this "Lentiest Lent" from Ezekiel and from the Gospel of John. Here it is, right here for us to hear and say, to see

and admit – death. In John, the story is deeply personal. In Ezekiel, it is the story of a whole people, a nation.

Ezekiel lived and followed God’s call to be a prophet during the final years of the nation of Judah. You have heard me speak of this time before – this last summer, our Old Testament readings took us through these dreary and dark times, when rulers were again and again turning away from following God’s will. Now, the nation has finally unraveled, and the conquering forces of the Empire of Babylon taken towns and cities and finally put the remnant city of Jerusalem under siege. They have conquered it and deported thousands away into exile. Babylon returned later and destroyed the city, and carried away a second wave of exiles. This pattern had been going on in Israel and Judah for over 150 years.

The people in exile and the remnant people left behind felt powerless. They felt uncertain about any future, and were in deep, lingering sorrow for all that had been lost, and they wondered if they ever again would be a people together. Everything they had known was changed – and they were no longer who they thought they had been. They moved through their days haunted by these ghosts of anxiety, uncertainty, disillusionment, loss, and unknowing. And, they knew there were many dead as a result of all the battles – and many who remained unburied, scattered in fields where battles had occurred over decades, because no one was going to leave the city to go bury the dead when to do so would be to put their own lives in danger.

Let’s take a moment now to pray for all those who die in isolation, who cannot see their families as they die from this coronavirus infection. Let’s pray for all those working like crazy to save lives and to stay healthy themselves, in hospitals and nursing homes and makeshift tent hospitals and medical ships.



(*The Valley of Dry Bones, Johann Melchior Bocksberger, 1587*)

And so, Ezekiel is taken by God to see a valley filled with bones. And “bones” in Old Testament text is a word that also is meant to show our deepest sense of self – you know the saying, “I knew it deep in my bones?” And some of the psalms that are cries to God talk about our bones being dried up and hope lost. These bones that Ezekiel saw were all dry – they had been dead for a long time. And God asks Ezekiel a question that dares to speak to possible hope: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Can life come again? Can hope and the spirit of life be rekindled and being to flow again in these bones?

So, Ezekiel follows God’s calling – to speak directly to the bones, and then to speak directly to the Holy Spirit, and then to speak directly to the dispirited people living their shadow-like lives without hope. Ezekiel speaks a command, a declaration of possibility, to the bones. “Come together! God will breathe new life into you – and you shall live!” Ezekiel then speaks a commanding invitation to the breath of God, the Holy Spirit – “Come from the four winds – come from every place where you already are – and breathe on these here, so they may live!” And then Ezekiel turns from this scene back to the people in exile and speaks a declaration of promise from God, “You are not done yet! I will bring you back from this dark and disheartening place, and you shall live again!”

You shall live.

Friends, even as we stay informed and listen with attentive ears to the situation all around us these days, paying attention to the descriptive details, it is so important also to seek and to listen for declarations of hope, of a future that has been promised. This has been the source of the great hope of people who have suffered or been oppressed or are in any pain or exile or isolation. This has been the great hope of slaves, and refugees, and diseased, and imprisoned, and poor, and abandoned – people through the ages.

Even those who wander in a lonely and frightful haze after trauma, hear words of hope reaching out to them through the fog, and coming alongside them even as they wander.

There’s a great book on leadership, called *The Three Laws of Performance*. It charts how big organizations and communities can get stuck in patterns that are deadly, and how the way out takes a change in view. Because, according to the first law, the way things occur to us – the ways we have become patterned to perceive our realities – is how they will be. In other words, how we choose to see and experience and perceive and interact with life around us then ends up shaping what life is. And, according to the second law, a lot of how things occur to us is because of the language we choose to use and the stories we choose to tell ourselves. We can get trapped in saying to ourselves stories of “Woe.” But, new life and light can come. And it comes also through a change in what we hear and tell ourselves – it comes with change in language. And, in the third law of performance, change and new life emerge through language as well – and it is not the language of description but the bold language of declaration – it is the language not of the present as we have continued to describe it to ourselves, but in the bold declaration of a possible and desirable future, that pulls us up with new energy.

This is the kind of Word that God utters, that God told Ezekiel to speak with commanding, strong, appealing language to the bones, and even to God's Holy Spirit, and to the hopeless people. "You shall live!"

Remember, dear friends, that God's Word to us is a Word of Life. God's Word of Life, the hope of all the ages, is Emmanuel, God-with-us, God who meets us and enters our suffering and pain with us, and calls us to a new life waiting for us right here, right now.

This is what we hear directly in the very personal story from the Gospel of John. Jesus speaks, and life happens. There has been a death in a small village outside the big city, in Bethany. It is one of Jesus' dear friends, Lazarus, and the brother of two of his closest friends, Martha and Mary. The home, and the village with them, is mourning and sorrowful. There is the heavy feel of grief in the air, as Jesus enters the village. Martha learns that Jesus is coming, and meets him and walks with him on the road, saying what everyone is thinking – "If only you had been here sooner, you could have made a difference – and my brother wouldn't have died." Mary is grieving deeply in the house, and comes out weeping to see Jesus, and says the same. And Lazarus is in the tomb, already laid to rest. They call Jesus to "Come and See," and then Jesus weeps.

Lazarus in the tomb. The bones of a nation filling a field. Death. The deal seems sealed. A cry, a moan, a sigh comes up from the ground, from bones and even from stones themselves, "How long?"

The cry touches and reaches Jesus, especially through Mary's tears. And Jesus himself weeps. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is stirred deeply by the cry of anyone and anything in creation, and weeps because Jesus loves each one.

Just as Ezekiel spoke new, commanding words that declared a bold new future, so Jesus speaks – to the people, then to God his Father, and then to Lazarus, and then the people again.

- "Take away the stone. Believe, and see the glory of God."
- "Father, thank you for hearing me."
- "Lazarus, come out!"
- "Unbind him, and let him go."

Each declaration by Jesus takes people to a bold new place. Taking away the stone means opening up again what everyone thought was a sealed deal. Hearing Jesus speak to God in thanks shifts everyone away from the empty space of their grief to looking toward God in hope and trust. Calling Lazarus is a declaration to the one most affected, to be stirred again to life and come forth to be seen. And unbinding Lazarus and setting him free is a final act of letting go of what everyone had wrapped him in to contain and preserve him.

Each declaration calls us gathered around the tomb to move, to see, to experience, to interact in trust. Trust, and hope. Hearing Jesus, we have now set before us life and death, and a choice to make. Trusting Jesus, we can choose life – this day, now, this time, now, this situation, now. Even in the face of death, of loss, of sorrow, of uncertainty for the future.

Even now.

Choose life. Choose to call to our Creator, to cry to our Great Lover and Friend. Choose to live.

As the great classic hymn says,

“I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers.
My days of praise shall ne’er be past
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.”

Let us spend our days in prayer and praise, in loving care of all we can reach. Let us dare to live into this boldly declared future – calling all we know to live until we pass beyond into the fullness of God’s embrace, even making at the grave our cry, “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!”

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.