

Sermon, Lent V, Year A 2011
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45
Psalm 130
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Gathering on this fifth Sunday of Lent it is as if the assemblers of the lectionary (RCL) are interested in preparing us for the idea of resurrection. Just two short weeks from now we will be confronting this concept dramatically on Easter morning. But it is as if those who brought together the lectionary readings are preparing us. They have given us material that causes us to reflect upon the very idea of resurrection.

In our OT lesson, the prophet Ezekiel experiences a vision with God. God takes Ezekiel by the hand and shows him a vision of the valley, the valley of exile. Israel has been conquered by the Babylonian empire. Israel is dead, wandering in exile. There is no life left. She has lost her temple, her land, her Davidic king, her covenant and her relationship with God. Israel has been overcome by the forces of death. Her life is dried up and blown away by the wind. The exiles wander a scorched earth. Dried bones litter the landscape as after a war. The scene is desolate. They are a people seemingly without hope or future.

Yet into this picture of desolation, God enters with the prophet Ezekiel. God asks the seemingly impossible question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Death litters the landscape and the answer would seem to be self-apparent. Why no, this is literally the valley of death. There is no life left, and no sign of an emerging future. Yet, Ezekiel responds from a storehouse of faith. The answer to the question lies only with the one asking it. The answer lies with God. Ezekiel realizes that only divine intervention can transform this landscape. He answers, "O Lord God, you know." Only God holds the promise of an answer. From humanities perspective the answer is no. Death is the end.

Yet, God is the source of all life. Creation began with God's inspired breath bringing forth life. Only God can breathe life into a scene so desolate. Yet, God directs Ezekiel to be a key participant, an essential participant in the restoration event. God directed Ezekiel to "prophesy" to the bones. "So 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.” Three times God directed Ezekiel to prophesy and each time there was a response in the bones covering the valley floor and life returned. Life emerged from death in one of scriptures most evocative lessons.

This morning we paired that lesson with the beautiful hymn, “Breathe on me, breath of God.” The hymn calls on God to breathe life into us, to fill us with the gift of God’s Holy Spirit. For it is only empowered by the Holy Spirit that we can “do what thou wouldst have us do.” Only with God’s empowerment can we arrive at a point where “we will have one will.”

The sacred stories of God bringing life from death are not limited to the Hebrew scriptures such as Ezekiel. Rather the gospel narrative includes these references as well.

And thus our story this morning describing the death of Lazarus, Jesus’ close friend. We don’t know why Jesus after receiving word of Lazarus’ illness stayed two days longer and took two more days to arrive, but that is what scripture gives us. When Jesus arrives Lazarus has been dead for four days. Four days is not the optimal time to resuscitate a corpse. The golden time to intervene is immediately, in that very short window after death lasting just four minutes before brain death begins. Jesus arrives a full four days later.

Yet the scene is an evocative one that we know so well. A young man in the prime of life has died from a sudden illness. Jesus is not removed or above the tragic emotional nature of this gathering. In fact, we witness the poignant emotion of Jesus at the death of his dear friend. “Jesus began to weep.” The RSV uses “Jesus wept”, the shortest sentence in scripture.

Jesus and God by extension are not unaffected in the midst of our losses, but suffer and feel our pain intimately. Jesus is drawn into action. “Where have you laid him?”

But what follows is not just a story of Jesus in action but of a community of faithful people acting together. Jesus calls on those gathered there. “Take me to where you have laid him?” And the community’s integral participation continues: “Roll away the stone.” “Unbind him.” Reading this passage I get the feeling that without the active participation of

the people the miracle would not have happened. Even Lazarus had to respond to Jesus' command, "Lazarus, come out!"

With this lesson from John's gospel and the earlier reading from Ezekiel, I have been focusing in part on the response of the people who were present. My focus on looking at scripture this way goes back to the beginning of this year and to our vestry retreat. Last January, the vestry gathered for a retreat at Roslyn Conference Center to begin our work together. As we gathered that first evening, we reflected upon a meditation in "Forward Day by Day". This was early in January and early in the season of Epiphany. The Epiphany actually comprises three events, one of which is the story of Jesus' first miracle at a wedding at Cana of Galilee. The Day by Day reflection focused upon the miracle of changing water into wine and specifically upon the work of the servants. Jesus' mother Mary had instructed the servants to do whatever Jesus instructed. Jesus ordered the servants to fill the stone purification jars with water. Then they were to take some of the contents to the wine steward. When the steward tastes the sample, it is no longer water but wine and very good wine at that. "When the steward tasted the water that had become wine", he did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew). The point of the reflection was that the miracle would not have happened without the participation of the servants. Those who did as Jesus' mother had told them. "Do whatever he says."

Ever since our retreat I have been looking at scripture in my familiar ways but also in new ways. I have been looking at the texts to see the role that ordinary people play in the story. What is the role of real people as we say?

In a sense I have developed a new perspective on scripture.

As I have said before, "some people say perspective is everything in life." Perspective certainly plays a key role in how we see and interpret the world around us.

From our weekend retreat together, the vestry emerged with a covenant with one another, of how we will work together and how we see our roles. The covenant is displayed on the vestry easel in Magill Hall. At the top of the covenant is this sentence based on the scripture reflection, "we are the ones who carry the water."

Two lessons from John's gospel provide bookends to this Sunday. The bookending of these two events from John's gospel, the miracle at the wedding at Cana and the raising of Lazarus are but two of the signs of Jesus' glory, of his messiahship, of his divinity. I am struck by how important our work is in each of the miracles. Our task is to listen to and for God as he yearns for our involvement in the miracles that are being performed here and now. Faith is a verb, an action and commitment. Where is God calling forth commitment from each of us? What venture or activity is a miracle in God's making that requires our active involvement to be successful?

The actions that the disciples must take are not impossible. (list: last week the man born blind had to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, at the feeding miracles the disciples had to distribute the bread and fish, the woman at the well had to go and get the man she was living with, Ezekiel had to prophesy to the bones, Lazarus' family and friends had to take Jesus to his tomb, they had to respond when Jesus said, "roll away the stone", and "unbind him". Even Lazarus had to respond when Jesus called to him. These actions in and of themselves are not impossible but God requires our involvement. We must listen to hear what God desires and then discovering, we must act. The miraculous depends on us.

Since the vestry retreat, I have been reading scripture with a new lens. I am reading scripture and looking to see what role the people play in living into the dream of God, what role do they play in the story. Looking at scripture in this new light then leads me to ask the question, "What does God expect of us?" What would God have us do? The more I read of Jesus' ministry, the more I see how much of his work required the participation of the disciples and others. His ministry was not a one person show. Rather at every step of the way he involved, perhaps even required the participation not just of those who were cured but of his disciples and others as well.

We gather here week after week to hear God's word proclaimed, to offer our prayers and to be fed at God's holy table with the sacramental body and blood of God's dearly beloved Son. Then we are sent out into the world, to be the hands of Christ to all whom we encounter. Just consider the possibilities of the miracles just waiting for our involvement.