

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2008

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45*

This week we have a fifth encounter with Jesus from John's Gospel. We usually refer to this text as the raising of Lazarus, so you might expect the encounter to be with Lazarus. Except, upon reading the text, we see that most of the conversation is between Jesus and Martha, sensible, pro-active, take-charge Martha. Martha is not shy about pointing out that Jesus could have done something to prevent Lazarus' death, if he had been there. And to her credit, she has listened to Jesus enough to know the promise of eternal life, that Lazarus will be raised on the last day. Martha gets it. She has a confidence. But it is only as big as a previously defined box. She has placed some limits on what to hope for.

But then Jesus starts talking about being the Resurrection and the Life, and that whoever believes will never die. It is as if he is saying that life is him, that trusting in him, blows open the possibilities for our lives, it un-does the finality of our deaths. Let me come back to this in a minute or two.

The other encounter here is the one with Lazarus (albeit that Lazarus is a pretty passive participant in the encounter, at least at first.) This encounter contains, what is purportedly the shortest verse in the Bible. "Jesus wept." In some ways, it is also one of the most hope-filled verses in the Bible. God weeps for us. God suffers with us. God is not some high, lofty, old guy with white hair, and long beard, sitting in flowing robes on a throne on a faraway cloud somewhere. God is not removed from the sorrows of the world God created. Jesus wept. And God aches for us, and with us. God knows the pain we inflict on ourselves, and on each other.

Which, if you stop to think about it, puts God in a very interesting position. God suffers with us and is, at one and the same time, justifiably angry with us, with good reason to judge and condemn our sinfulness; and, on our side, wanting us to find the way to collectively end suffering, to live in peace. Jesus shared the sorrow of the loss of Lazarus, and we can presume, I think, that he shared the joy of Lazarus raised again. God wants nothing more than to share the collective joy of the reconciliation of humankind with itself. God has a vested interest in guiding us, luring us, encouraging us into the ways of peace. I don't know about you, but I find that to be incredibly hopeful, to know that God is on our side.

But now, let me come back to Jesus' conversation with Martha. I find in it echoes of the conversation between God and the prophet Ezekiel from our first lesson today. We should understand that Martha's despair over the death of Lazarus was not simply the loss of a loved one. Mary and Martha lived with their brother Lazarus. Without him, without a male in the household to be the property owner, Mary and Martha would no longer be able to hold their property. Losing Lazarus was more than losing his companionship. It meant the loss of life, livelihood, and security. Without Lazarus they

had no sense of a path into their future; no sense of how things could possibly be right, and whole again. All was lost.

Therein are the echoes of Ezekiel and the vision God gave Ezekiel of looking over a valley of dry bones. A little background on Ezekiel: he was a prophet during the time of the Exile. The children of Israel had been carried off to Babylon as prisoners-of-war. There they were now slaves. They had been taken away from everything that mattered to them, their homes, their land, their Temple. These were the people who wrote the psalm about hanging their harps on the willow trees for how could they sing their songs in a strange land. They felt despair, hopelessness. Into that despair, God gave Ezekiel the vision of the valley of dry bones, and asked, "Can these bones live?"

To which Ezekiel responds, "Oh Lord, you know." (Which, I think, was Ezekiel's way of saying, I really don't see how, but it's probably not a good idea to tell the Lord, 'No, I don't think you can do it.')

And then we have this most amazing image, Ezekiel's vision, the image of the valley of dry bones, and a noise, a rattling, as bone came together, bone on its bones, and sinews, and flesh and skin, and eventually breath and life.

The message to Ezekiel couldn't be any clearer. These dry bones were the house of Israel – languishing in captivity. They had lost hope that God could or would do anything to bring them, as a people, back to life. But God had other plans. God could, God would, restore them. In God's time.

I don't know about you but some days I look out, I look around and all I see is dry bones. The names change over the decades, but it is always the same: Israelis and Palestinians, Sunnis and Shiites, shootings and bombings, robbery and corruption, greed, injustice, loss, suffering. Environmental crisis, exploitation of the poor, of the earth, oppression of the weak, violence, crime, war. The whole sorry sinful state of the world is a valley of dry bones. And some days they are very dry. Or, to take the other image, we are dying, and our bondage to sin stinks.

Can these bones live? Is there any reason to believe that things can change? Is there any basis for hope? The answer is, and must always be, Yes, Yes, Yes!. We may not be able to see how, but God makes the world rattle every now and again. Often in ways we never expect, nor even dare to hope. Most of the time we are more like Martha whose hope was boxed in by a reasonable expectation. But sometimes God invites us to be part of an unreasonable expectation. God invites us to have hope; hope that the sin of the world does not get the last word, that the power of love and forgiveness can overcome the power of sin. Hope, the hope born out of seeing the power of love and forgiveness at work, is an essential aspect of the Christian life. Hope is the conviction that all is not bounded by what is possible for us. Life is bounded only by what God yet may do.

My yoga teacher is fond of talking about letting go of the unknowable future. I think he is talking about letting go of worry, of anxiety over that unknowable future. We usually fixate on all the bad things that could happen. We call that worry. But there are just as many unknowable good things that could happen. Sometimes, looking back we call them coincidences. I just think of them as God setting bone on bone, until all the right possibilities fall into place. Who knows what God yet may do?

Though, I did observe one thing this time around that I hadn't noticed before. In the vision, Ezekiel had a role. God asked him to prophesy to the bones, and again, later to call the four winds. Even Lazarus had something to do. He came out when he was called. God is always, always, at work through us. Responding to God's call and hope go together. One couldn't respond too well if one had no hope that it would make any difference.

As Christians we are called to live hope, to live the expectation that more is possible that we often even dare to imagine. Hope, and not despair, is the last and truest aspect of the Christian life. At the core of that hope is the promise that even though we die, we live. No matter what, our life in Christ transcends this earthly realm. Our life in Christ is not dimmed by sin and sorrow. In Christ Jesus we have resurrection and life. This is our hope, that no matter how dead the death, no matter how dry the bones, the bones will live, life will be restored. Thanks be to God. Amen.