

Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year A

Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice; *

Thus we prayed, in Psalm 130. It is as if someone chose our readings for today specifically for this time, this place.

Indeed, we have been brought to the middle of a valley, full of dry, *very* dry bones. Ezekiel wrote: They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ We are cut off completely. Is that not part of what we are feeling? Even if we venture outside the walls of our homes, we must keep a safe distance from one another. We almost look with suspicion at others we see, not knowing where they have been, or if they are one of those who are carrying the virus without symptoms.

Yes, the physical distancing we must practice these days is hard. And it can seem especially hard in the context of our life as community, as church, who are accustomed to coming together to pray, to support one another, to break bread and share the one cup. Technology can do many things, but it cannot let us share body and blood. We did not anticipate this kind of Lent, this kind of fasting.

But perhaps now we are being forced to live out physically what we have been experiencing existentially for some time – the separation, isolation, divisiveness that seems to surround us. As retired pastor and shaman Jim Roberts wrote recently, “(But) we have had a way of ‘othering’ everything, everyone, even ourselves. We have divided ourselves far beyond what any virus could do! We are being grimly forced now into separation, 6 feet please, if you must be here at all.”ⁱ

Ezekiel was writing in a time of despair – when he and all his people were in exile in Babylon. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’

It is that sense of despair that can grip us when we are repeatedly faced with suffering, especially suffering caused by something seemingly beyond our control. We watch the numbers of those infected by the virus rise, along with the count of those who have died. And still we hear others weighing whether the future of the economy does not matter more than the lives of the vulnerable among us. Yes, it sometimes seems we have lost our very humanity. Our very bones *are* dried up.

But now, hear the Word of God – spoken to Ezekiel in the time of his fear and despair and to us in ours: Then he said to me, “Prophesy 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.” Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.”

When God’s spirit is within us, we shall live. We cannot live out God’s presence within us and continue to dwell in graves of separation and indifference and despair.

And if the message God has for us this morning was not clear enough, we hear it again in today’s Gospel. John the Evangelist – our patron saint – is writing to a community of believers who have been excommunicated – barred from their synagogue – their “church,” – if you will. They, like us in this moment, could not worship as they always had. They were being shunned – because they had come to believe in the Way of Jesus.

It is to these people that John tells the story we have this morning – and it is a story not present in any other gospel. Remember that in John’s Gospel, next to nothing is literal. This story – like most of John’s Gospel – is about how we experience God in our lives. Both Martha and Mary greet Jesus by saying, “If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They had their own idea of what Jesus should have done – he should have come earlier and prevented this bad thing from happening. In all honesty, don’t we all have our own ideas of how God should be acting in our lives, in the world around us? But pay attention to Jesus’ response – and remember that Jesus is always revealing God to us. Jesus meets them in their grief and despair. Jesus himself weeps with them. God, Jesus is telling us, is right here with us in the midst of our pain. And then Jesus goes to the tomb, and calls in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

And what is Lazarus to come out from? From death, yes – from the tomb, from all that is holding him bound. And from Ezekiel we hear again: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...”

When God’s spirit is within us, we shall live. We cannot live out God’s presence within us and continue to dwell in graves of separation and indifference and despair.

There is grace in all this, I believe. We are being challenged to find new ways to form and build and deepen relationships, new ways to communicate, new ways to care for one another. We have been forced to see that church cannot be confined to the building. We are called to see that God is indeed present wherever we are.

There is a quote from William Young's book, *The Shack*, that speaks to me here, where God says this:

"Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me. Grace doesn't depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors."ⁱⁱ

It is hard to come out of the tomb. It's hard to open our hearts and minds to new ways of doing things. We get set in our own ways. But there is grace in this moment.

Matthew Fox urges us to see it. He says:

"What if we let our GRIEF open us to a new pathway as a species, a new calling as humans?"

Listen deeply to the soul... and begin, even at a distance outside, to greet those "others", make a friend at 10 feet, feel the common drama of the unknown ahead, and let the FEAR become compassion and longing for belonging...

I may have had to give up the church for Lent, but I won't give up a soaring prayer that through this virus all the "others" can finally see, accept, respect, even learn to love each other."

Even in the darkness of this time, may we hear the invitation to come out of the tombs of all that is not life giving – and see the grace present.

Amen.

- [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#) [Romans 8:6-11](#) [John 11:1-45](#) [Psalm 130](#)

ⁱ Robert, Jim. Quoted: <https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2020/03/27/a-sabbatical-for-our-species-in-a-time-of-a-pandemic/>

ⁱⁱ William P. Young, *The Shack*.