

Sermon: Lent 5

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 26, 2017

Year A
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

On Ash Wednesday... the church went into its room to pray... on Mar. 5 we heard about the temptations of pride... power... and possessions... those qualities and things we are called to resist... as Jesus did... on Mar. 12 we were reminded about Nicodemus and the womb... being born again from above... on Mar. 19 we heard about the Samaritan woman and the well... baptismal waters gushing up to eternal life... last Sunday we read about the man born blind and washing in the pool of Siloam to be healed... and today we hear about a tomb... about death and stench... that can be overcome by these things...

Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of Spirit... and today... Romans reminds us that we are not in the flesh... we are in the Spirit... since the Spirit of God dwells in us... Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he is the I AM... Jesus tells the man born blind that he is the Son of Man... who brings life...

*Mortal... can these bones live... O Lord God... you know... these bones are valley dry... like bones that are finally put into an ossuary... a small stone box made for this purpose... maybe you could get some DNA from the marrow... but these are bones that have laid out in the scorching desert sun for months or more... sun bleached and with no hope of life... but God brings life from death... God promises to restore Israel from its corporate sin... God says... *I am going to open your graves... and bring you back to Israel... and put my Spirit within you... and you shall live... and have real life... you shall become My people again...**

In the Gospel of Luke... there's the story about the rich man who dressed in purple and feasted sumptuously every day... a poor man named Lazarus lay by his gates... who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table... probably not the same Lazarus as in John's Gospel... and in Luke... Jesus resuscitates the widow of Nain's son... and Jairus' daughter...

We cannot conclude that Martha and Mary knew all of those things about which Luke wrote... perhaps Martha and Mary knew only about Jesus' ability to heal... perhaps they knew about the man born blind... and how Jesus healed him... that may be why the two sisters sent word to Jesus that their brother... Lazarus... whom Jesus loved... was ill... but Martha and Mary were thinking too small... they each said to him... *Lord... if you had been here... my brother would not have died...* they had hoped that Jesus would heal their brother BEFORE he died... but like last week's story... Jesus is increasingly interested in demonstrating God's glory... that's why... in spite of how he must have felt... he didn't arrive until the fourth day...

Pastor Christine Chakoian wrote: *One of the most vivid, realistic aspects of this passage in John is that sorrow and grief are allowed to emerge full bore... Martha is resentful of Jesus' delay... yet in the same breath she trusts in the power of his compassion... Mary blames Jesus... and at the same time kneels at his feet...*

So here's a question... if all of creation... the galaxies... and stars... the gaseous nebulae... the planets... the moon... the comets and meteors... and our human lives... arose first and foremost... out of God's love... then why can't new life arise out of that same love...

In January 2010... one of the questions on my General Ordination Exams... was about how the principles of our Christian tradition and faith... are lived out... when providing heroic medical efforts at keeping someone alive... when the medical system's resources... and our financial reserves and emotional investments... don't provide the

signs of improvement we'd like to see... what happens is that we may unintentionally diminish our loved one's humanity... and the tubes and wires to which they're connected may mirror the spiritual or emotional tethers which keep them bound to us... and the resources we encumber... might be better spent securing a more significant outcome for someone else...

As we've listened to our Lenten resources... within our churchy prayer room... we have seen Jesus moving towards his death... last week... the Pharisees asked Jesus whether he thought they were blind... and we're reminded that the Jewish people in Palestine were tethered to an oppressive Roman... and Roman religious rule... their myopic motive was to protect Judaism...

because today's Gospel ends with... *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did... believed in him... but it continues... but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done... so from that day on... they planned to put him to death... resuscitating Lazarus became the motive to put Jesus to death...*

Preaching professor Jason Byassee wrote: tyrants love death... it's their tool of choice to keep folks behaving... but what would it mean not to fear it... what would it mean to have a Lord who snorts at it... who sneers at it... what would it mean to be a people who know the grave is only temporary... what would it mean for tyrants to be brought down low... and for pride... power... and possessions to be used only as tools to build the Kingdom... The Magnificat... realized in a time of great oppression... and which we rarely hear... expresses God's approach... listen...

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit

rejoices in God my Savior;

for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed: the

*Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his
Name.*

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

*He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered
the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has
lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he
has sent away empty.*

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has
remembered his promise of mercy,*

*The promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his
children for ever.*

The Magnificat is what's called Liberation Theology... an understanding of Christian theology which emphasizes a concern for the oppressed... sometimes called the *preferential option for the poor*... the best-known examples come from the Catholic Church in Latin America... but during the 1950s and 1960s... the Roman Catholic Church forbid the use of the Magnificat... because it was deemed too provocative... too rebellious... and far too threatening to those in power...

In today's story... Jesus says to the crowd... *unbind him, and let him go*... so I wonder... what it must have been like for Lazarus... to be resuscitated... to come back to awareness... to realize where he was... of being bound in death clothing... did it take a moment for him to realize who was calling him... called by God to come out of the place of death... and to be unbound... to be freed of both literal and symbolic death clothes... and maybe to feel as though he'd been given another chance... at really being alive...

But today's story is also about the unbinding of political and religious oppression... it's about the unbinding of our own fears... the unbinding of our limitations... and about our re-binding... about being born again from above in water and in Spirit... so we too... can sneer at death...

So what are the things in our culture that are dying... so they can give rise to new life... what does it mean to voluntarily enter our own tombs... and see what death is... to smell the stench of dead things that no longer serve us well... what are the things in our communities... our churches... our families... ourselves... that need to die... how can we possibly move into the increasing boundlessness that God has prepared for us to walk in... unless the boundaries which have kept us from boundlessness... also die... Jesus said to Martha... I AM the resurrection.. and the life... those who TRUST in me... even though they die... will live... so do we really believe it... do we really trust that once we leave this place... we will be re-united with God... blindness and death are not the end... so how do we see... and how do we live now... to unbind each other and our world...

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