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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series A)

April 6, 2014

Text: John 11:17–27, 38–53

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's OT reading is one of the most peculiar in all of Scripture. The prophet Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones representing the death-like existence of the people of Israel. It must have been a staggering experience for Ezekiel. Try to imagine how awe-full it must have been for Scripture says that the Lord placed Ezekiel into the middle of the valley filled with human bones (vs. 1).

There's a popular Sunday School song, based upon an African spiritual, about this Bible passage. *D'em Bones* describes the various bones being put back together again. The chorus says "Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around. Now hear the word of the Lord." It's a fun little song but I'm not sure it quite captures the gravity of Ezekiel's prophecy.

God's OT people were dead, not literally, but most definitely dead in spirit. Years of idolatry, disobedience, and lukewarm, halfhearted worship had left them dead. The result was the nation of Israel had been conquered with a generation of youth slain in battle, the nation's nobility deported into Babylonian captivity, the Temple destroyed, and the Holy Land left desolate. The hope and possibility of a bright future were utterly destroyed. And the promises God had given through Abraham and David seemed utterly abandoned. Israel was dead.

And right smack dab in the middle of the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord puts Ezekiel and asks him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (vs. 3). Can life come from death? That's the great question being posed in both the OT and Gospel readings. Can life come from death? It's another way of asking what kind of God do we believe, love, and adore.

At the command of the Lord, Ezekiel preached to the valley of dry bones. "Thus says the Lord...Behold I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...and you shall know that I am the Lord" (vs. 4–6). Through the power of God's preached word, the

people of God were resurrected. The Lord gave a powerful promise that day in the valley of dry bones – ones that tells us what kind of God we worship and adore –

“Thus says the Lord God: Behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord” (vs. 12–14).

The Biblical God is the God of life and resurrection. He takes the hopeless situation and gives hope. In the midst of ultimate defeat, He works transcendent victory. No situation is beyond His saving work, no sin beyond forgiveness, no sinner beyond redemption. Not the death of a nation, not the loss of innocence, no human tragedy is beyond the transformative power of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Consider Lazarus in today’s gospel reading. The situation is beyond hope. Lazarus is dead. And what makes it appear all the worse is that Lazarus’ death resulted from what could be called divine neglect. You don’t have all of chapter 11 in your bulletin but take a look when you get home (pew Bible) but Jesus was told that Lazarus was sick. The Lord responds to the news by saying that Lazarus’ illness would not lead to death but God would be glorified through it. And Jesus stayed where He was for another 2 days (vs. 3-5). At the end of 2 days, Jesus tells His disciples that Lazarus has died and it’s time to go to Judea, the region where Lazarus had lived.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus’ hometown, his sister Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (vs. 21). By this time, Lazarus has been dead 4 days. Lord, if you had only acted sooner, taken charge when called upon, answered the prayer when it was given.

Divine neglect. Have you ever thought God wasn’t keeping His end of the deal? In 1993, Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, published a book entitled, “When God Doesn’t Make Sense.” It eventually sold over a million copies. Obviously a large number of Christians thought the Lord didn’t always act in sensible ways.

Why wait 4 days? It doesn’t make any sense. Could not God’s glory have been revealed through a healing without all the heartache of Lazarus’ death? To this Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (vs. 25–26).

Do you hear what Jesus is saying to Martha and all creation? What He's claiming in these words? He not only gives resurrection, He is resurrection. He not only has life, He is life. He is the God of the living who is resurrection and life incarnate in human flesh and blood.

And yet, Martha confesses faith in Jesus nonetheless. Vs. 27, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." In the face of confusion, hurt, disappointment, and disillusionment, faith and trust in Jesus finds a way. You are the Christ. I don't always understand, but I believe you are the Christ, nonetheless, and you will do me good. For that is the kind of God who is resurrection and life.

Jesus goes to Lazarus' tomb. The Lord who is resurrection and life stares into the face of what appears to be the ultimate end, death. Jesus prays to His Father and then speaks with a loud, commanding voice, "Lazarus, come out" (vs. 43). Life and resurrection prevail. Death is vanquished for Lazarus walks out of death into life. Jesus is the God who brings life from death for He is life. "Unbind him, and let him go" commands the Lord (vs. 44). Even the burial clothing must be set aside. Death must let go and give way to resurrection life.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:3–5).

Does it make any sense whatsoever for Ezekiel to preach to a valley of dry bones or for Jesus to speak to a dead Lazarus or for a pastor to apply water in God's Trinitarian name to a born sinner? Only if God is the God of resurrection and life.

People of God, you are living in resurrection life for you are living in Jesus, connected to Him through baptismal grace. The things we believe and do aren't empty and void but are sure and certain. Jesus gives resurrection life to our dead spirits and the hope of undying life to our bodies in the resurrection on the Last Day. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh would have us believe that death, corruption, and oppression are ultimate realities, our ultimate and final fate. But Jesus says no. I am resurrection and life. All that is evil and wicked and deceitful must bow to Me for I am the God who brings life from death, good from evil, victory from defeat.

Do you believe this? Jesus asked Martha that question. Her answer is as sure and complete for us as it was for her. “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (vs. 27).

Having been united to Jesus in His death and resurrection, live and prosper in His undying life. I am the God of life, I have spoken, and I have done what I said, says the Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.