

Sermon: Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | March 26, 2023

This morning we read about death and loss in both the Old Testament and the Gospel texts. A symbolic death of the community of Israel when they are exiled from their homeland. And death of one Jesus loved; a friend of Jesus named Lazarus.

Death is the most certain thing in human existence. It's the inevitable culmination of all human life. And yet this rational piece of knowledge doesn't make death any less painful. Death's inevitability doesn't make the loss any more manageable. Gut-wrenching pain and loss are all too real in the face of death.

The people of Israel faced that pain and loss as a community when they were exiled into Babylon. The people had lost their land, their homes, their families, and everything that belonged to them. The loss certainly seemed like death, the end of the community.

It is during this time, that Ezekiel has a vision, where he sees himself being taken by Spirit of God and being set in the middle of a valley. In the vision the Spirit leads him around the valley and what Ezekiel finds is that the valley is full of bones, bones of the numerous people who lived there, bones that had become dry. A people group, a community had symbolically died. The Spirit tells Ezekiel in the vision that this community was the house of Israel which cries out "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

The reality of death of a community is real and painful. How often have people throughout the world and throughout history cried out 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' People who have been uprooted from their homes, people who have been victims of atrocities and genocides, people who have been caught in endless wars, they all have

experienced that loss and death- dried up, lost hope, and cut off completely.

And yet God asks Ezekiel a question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Looking at those dry bones, maybe Ezekiel gave a skeptical smile even in the vision. He must have thought, "What!? Can these bones live? No!" These bones are dry. This community has died. This is the end! At least that's what it seemed like.

A similar end or loss is experienced by Martha and Mary in the Gospel. They experience the death of their brother, Lazarus. They in fact were desperately trying everything they could to save him. When Lazarus was ill, they sent word to Jesus to come and help. And yet, the reality was that their brother died. Despite all they did, they could not save him.

A couple of years back when my aunt, who lived with my family and raised me and my siblings since our childhood, was sick in India in a rural village, my aging parents were having a hard time trying to provide care. My siblings and I loved her dearly. Though we were all far off and scattered in different parts of the world, we did everything we could in trying to arrange care for her. I stayed awake all through the night, calling friends of friends in India to see if someone could help. My sister's family travelled with their two young kids to take care of my aunt. We did everything that was possible, and yet we could not save her. We experienced a painful loss.

And so, when Jesus does come to Martha and Mary, the first thing that both of them say to Jesus is: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Oh, how they wish things could have gone another way. How they wished Jesus was there and their brother would not have died. And yet he had died. To them this was the end! At least that's what it seemed like.

The dry bones of a community of people, the death of the brother, are both the reality and symbols of the limits of humanity. From the perspective of human finitude, it symbolizes the end. It's where strivings and efforts end.

And yet, God asks "Can these bones live?" Jesus asks Martha, do you believe that I am resurrection and the life? In the overwhelming reality and experience of death, God speaks of life. In the situation of death, Jesus says, "I am life."

God seems to say, that though death (symbolic and physical) seems like the end from human perspective, it isn't so from God's infinite standpoint. The life that God speaks of knows no bounds or limitations. This is a new kind of life, life as a grace, not limited by human finitude. It is a life which opens even the darkest and painful of situations to new and unending realms of possibilities in God.

In his vision Ezekiel sees the bones coming together, and ligaments, flesh, and skin covering them. Finally, he sees breath entering them, and the people live again. Impossible as it may have seemed then, in a few years the Babylonians were to be overpowered by the Persians and the Israelites were able to return to their homeland to build their community again. This is what God meant, when talked about the dry bones living again. God speaks life in a situation of death, because God is that infinite life.

Jesus shares in the pain of Martha and Mary. When he sees the sisters crying along with the people, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. And Jesus himself begins to weep. He sobs and tears flow from his eyes. Jesus feels their pain and sorrow. He too loved Lazarus and he feels a loss. Jesus binds himself to each of us as we experience loss and suffering.

And then he calls Lazarus out. And Lazarus does come out of the tomb. Though Lazarus lives again we know that Lazarus dies eventually. But what Jesus did there was to remind all that he was lord even over death. Death is not the end. "I am the life" Jesus had said.

God is life, always opening up every situation to new possibilities of grace and life. As we go through our lives, even when we walk through valleys of deaths, may we always know that the God is life. May that God who is life comfort us and keep us in every circumstance. May Jesus give us grace and always lead us into life and flourishing. Amen.