

Lent 5 A: March 26, 2023

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11:1-45

This 5th Sunday of Lent has readings that are all about foreshadowing the coming weeks and the resurrection. In Ezekiel we hear the prophet prophesying the return of the people of Israel, as if raised from the dead from a valley of dry bones. In the Psalm we hear the plaintive call of ones who long for the Lord to rescue them. In the Gospel we hear the account of the raising of Lazarus. And in Romans we hear Paul's further treatise on flesh and spirit – that living in the Spirit is the very essence of being alive in God.

This morning I want to focus on the gospel lesson from John and the story of Lazarus. Much of this story is really a foreshadowing of the resurrection story, and is placed here in the Revised Common Lectionary for obvious reasons. Jesus was across the Jordan having recently escaped a stoning by the Pharisees after another dust up with them. Lazarus, a good friend, and brother to Martha and Mary of Bethany (near Jerusalem) fell ill and the sisters sent word for Jesus to come. He told his disciples that Lazarus' illness would not mean death but it is ultimately for God's glory,

and he remained several more days. Then he announces to his disciples it is time to go. They try to dissuade him because of the recent attempt on his life but he would not listen...and he tells them that Lazarus has 'fallen asleep'. The disciples reason, 'well, if he has fallen asleep, he will wake'. You can tell that the disciples were not keen on going back to Judea and into harms way.

Then he speaks more plainly telling them indeed Lazarus is dead. Thomas boldly proclaims, let us go die with him! – perhaps not a lot of faith, but at least courage! When he finally arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days. Martha encounters him first and tells him she believes that if he would have been here Lazarus would not have died. Jesus tells him he will rise again, and Martha says, 'well, of course in the resurrection.....'. And here is the theological point of the whole story when Jesus says: "I am resurrection and life. Those who believe in me will never die."

Then Jesus encounters Mary. Mary too says 'if you had only been here, he would not have died'. Jesus was very moved by the scene – all the weeping and mourning.....and here, as they say, the shortest verse in the Bible (In the King James Version): "Jesus wept". They take him to the cave where Lazarus is buried and orders the stone rolled away (hmmm, is this sounding familiar to anyone?). And here one of the most humorous verses in the Bible. On hearing Jesus' command, Martha, ever the practical one, stops her weeping.....I can imagine her a little startled and trying to find her voice, and, as the King James has it: "Lord, by this time he stinketh!" Indeed!

Jesus says a prayer, then with a loud voice cries out: “Lazarus, come forth!” Lazarus comes out and is bound in his burial cloth---probably the very first image of a living mummy that we have! Jesus tells them, again, as in the King James, ‘loose him, and let him go.’

Now there is much in these reading to commend them to us for prayer and contemplation. Perhaps in Lent we have discovered that maybe we have been in the valley of dry bones, or carried off in exile in some manner and we don’t know if God is still God, or perhaps we’re all wrapped up in death....and maybe a little stinky! But the message today is one of life, and especially a life for which death has no dominion!

Though Ezekiel may have been prophesying about God’s continuing promise to the people of Israel and that the nation can come back, and God will breathe life into it/them, as Christians we also see the power of the ‘*ruach*’ of God – the spirit of God that ultimately makes it all happen. So too in the Gospel-- Jesus is shown to have the power over life itself; he has the power to call us out and to unbind us. I kinda like the fact that Jesus calls us out, but it was his disciples that then helped to unbind Lazarus. Jesus calls us to life, and we have the responsibility to ‘loose’ those who are held captive – helping each other to be free. In this case, ‘the bound helping the bound’, as it were!

I’ll close with a little practical story that exemplifies this from a book called *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, by Fr. Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest. The book is about his career of over 20 years working with the gangs of Los Angeles. He tells heart-breaking story after heart-breaking story about the lives of the kids and the many kids he

buried from gang violence. But it is filled with good humor too. At one point he tells about the funny malapropisms that would occur when he would go to say mass at a detention center or jail and the boys would accidentally replace words they didn't know with ones they did know when reading the scripture lessons – he calls them 'homie-propisms' ('Homie' is how they refer to each other – especially in their own gang). One boy when announcing his reading said, "A reading from Paul's letter to the Filipinos"; and another boy, reading from Acts and not knowing the word 'gentile', replaced it each time with 'genitals'. Fr. Gregory said if you want an exciting and hysterical reading of Acts, just try replacing 'gentile' with 'genitals' as you read it! Ha!

But what I want to share with you from this book is this cut-to-the-heart story of a time right after Fr. Gregory had buried yet another boy from gang violence and a young former gang banger with anger issues by the name of Freddy comes to comfort him – it is clear that all the gangs have a deep and abiding love and respect for 'G', as they call him, even if not for each other. Fr. 'G' tells the story....

“I know your heart is breaking,” he says, beginning to cry. “ I wish I had a magic wand to pass over your pain.” As an adult, I can’t recall ever crying with another person more fully than at that moment. We both just lose our selves in sobbing. Usually, I’d put myself, as the homies say, “on check status,” but even I couldn’t pull this off at the moment. I’d been holding this enormous, outsize grief “in check” for so long and had sudden permission to release it in the gentle urging and vast heart of Freddy. At twenty-three years old, he had worked at Homeboy [the agency Fr. Gregory started to get employment for kids who wanted out of gang life] for some years now in a wide variety of sites and tasks, but his singularly spectacular temper required frequent changes of venue. First the silkscreen plant, then the bulky-item drop off center, and now, here at the headquarters. He surely, at this moment, knew how to use his deep rage and essential wound to hold all that I was carrying.

“You know, all of us here are drowning,” Freddy begins with difficulty, the tears a tide that he’s swimming against. “ And YOU...you just reach in....and sweep us up.” We resume our wailing, holding our heads, rocking some, unable to speak. Then Freddy, with his teeth clenched, and something nearly resembling his frequent bursts of anger, points his finger at me with a holy determination.

“I swear to you,” he says, “ If someone offered me a choice – right now – a million dollars or a chance to swoop ya up –” Freddie stops and swallows hard against this overflow crying.

“I....would....swoop...you...up.” Through my tears, I am barely able to eke out, “You just did....you just did.” (p. 171)

And there’s the story, there’s the truth. Sometimes we feel like a valley of dry bones, or all bound up by this or that. But God has the power to bring life to your bones, loose your bonds, and ‘swoop you up’ ---and

sometimes in the unlikely guise of a 'Freddy' ...or maybe God is calling you to be that Freddy for someone in these trying times.

You know, in the gospel, Mary thought that Jesus needed to be there in order for her brother not to die, and even though he did eventually show up and bring 'resurrection', I think the greater story for us is that he does not need to be here/there in person, or at least in the way she was looking for him. Mary was 'bound' in her notion of the way Jesus would show up, but now he is always and everywhere 'the resurrection and the life', as he told her sister, Martha. We need to wake up to the fact that Jesus might appear to us as a Freddy, who will reach down and 'swoop us up!'