

Lent 5  
Year A 2017  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
John 11:1-45

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel is one of the most entrancing passages of the Old Testament and has been for centuries.

A simple Google search returns more than 80,000 references to scripture, art, historical texts and so on.

What is it about this passage that so captures the imagination?

Ezekiel states that the hand of Lord came upon him and by the power of the spirit he was transported to a valley filled with bones.

The Lord asks Ezekiel:

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel responds:

"O Lord God, you know."

God then directed Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones:

“O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.  
Thus says the Lord God to these bones:

I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.

I will lay sinews on you and  
cause flesh to come upon you,  
and cover you with skin, and put breath in you,  
and you shall live;  
and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

And as all well behaved prophets would do,  
Ezekiel prophesied to the dry bones  
the words the Lord had given him.

And so it was as the Lord had said,  
the bones came together with sinew and flesh  
and covered in skin.

But still there was no breath in the bones.

The Lord then directed Ezekiel  
to prophesy to the breath  
to come into the bones  
and so it was.

The breath came into the bones and they lived.

It's a fascinating image,  
a prophet of Israel  
standing in a desert valley strewn with bones,  
listening to the voice of the Lord,  
and interpreting it to the bones so that they may live.

It's an equally intriguing image  
of a prophet of Israel  
standing in the midst of the people of Israel,  
exiled and enslaved,  
in Babylon.

A group of captives who have lost all hope  
That they will ever return to their home.

A group of captives filled with despair,  
estranged from God,  
a captive people who have forgotten the promises of God.

A nation who have forgotten  
the sound of the voice of God.

That is,  
until Ezekiel stands among them and prophesies to them,  
and the very breath of God enters them once again.

It is then,  
that they are brought up from their graves  
into new life.

A new life with God in the present.

It is at this point  
that they are able to once again  
hear the voice of God calling them  
into a new life, a new experience, with God.

Next we hear from John the Gospeler,  
the story of Jesus raising Lazarus.

It begins with news that  
a man from Bethany, Lazarus, takes ill.

The sisters of Lazarus,  
Martha and Mary, send word to Jesus:

“Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

Interestingly enough,  
when Jesus received this message,  
He seemed undisturbed  
as he stayed an additional two days where he was.

After two days,  
Jesus leads the disciples out to Bethany  
where they are met by Martha.

After being admonished by Martha for his tardiness,  
Jesus says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha responds by saying,  
“I know that he will rise again  
in the resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus responds, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Then Jesus, Martha, Mary,  
the disciples, and those gathered to mourn,  
all make their way to the tomb where Lazarus has been laid.

When the crowd reaches the tomb,  
Jesus stops and addresses God,  
“Father, I thank you for having heard me.”

Then Jesus cries out:

“Lazarus come out!”

And Lazarus stands and emerges from the tomb.

Lazarus responded to the call of Jesus  
And was raised to new life.

I think that many of you,  
like me, were raised in churches,  
families, and communities that focused  
on the literal resurrection of Lazarus.

So much so that,  
our focus on a literal resurrection  
distracts us from the message that would have  
been heard by the original hearers  
of this passage in John’s gospel.

We get caught up in  
was it real, how could it be real,  
what evidence do we have, and so on,  
so that we barely pay attention  
to the second part of Jesus’ response to Martha:

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

Lazarus hears the voice of Jesus  
and comes out of the darkness.

He rises and comes forth.

I am the resurrection *and the life*.

How does this passage change for us  
if we hear we are called to life,  
here and now,  
with Jesus?

Commentator, Karoline Lewis,  
remarks that over the course of the last three weeks  
we have just finished a series of resurrection stories.

The Samaritan woman at the well,  
the healing of the man born blind,  
and the raising of Lazarus.

She states:

*Resurrection is not something you have to believe;  
not something just conveniently confessed;  
not that which can be comprehended.*

*Resurrection can only be experienced.*

*That is the heart of these three stories.*

*Resurrection is not a confession.  
Resurrection is not a theory.  
Resurrection is not some sort of ambiguous promise.*

*No, resurrection is real.*

*Resurrection is relationship with God.*

*Resurrection is now.*

Just as it was for the people of Israel  
resurrected, restored, and renewed  
by the breath of God,  
so it was for Lazarus,  
Martha, Mary,  
the disciples and all gathered  
around Jesus.

People restored to new life  
in the present  
by their experience of the divine.

These lessons today  
connect us with people  
who in their time and place  
had fallen prey to despair and hopelessness  
because of the condition of the world around them.

They had lost the ability to hear  
the voice of the divine  
calling to them  
in love, with hope,  
to empower and renew them  
in the midst of despair.

We also are living in a time of  
turmoil, fear, and despair.

Some of us feel as though  
every piece of news we hear  
is more dire than the last.

We want to shut ourselves away from the world  
in hope that, miraculously,  
the world will change for the better  
without our participation.

It's really tempting isn't it?

I know.

But what if we take heart  
from today's lessons?

Instead of just dismissing them  
as fantastical images  
that bear no semblance of reality to our world?

What if we let go of the urge to  
impose science, fact, and literalism  
on these passages?

Instead, can we take the essence of these stories to heart and recognize that we can always be more mindful of ways in which we can open our ears, eyes and hearts to the divine?

Are we able to recognize that we can always make ourselves available to new life.

Karoline Lewis again:

*What if resurrection were  
the experience of a conversation with Jesus  
that then transforms us from a woman rejected  
to a witness of God's love;  
of Jesus putting mud on our eyes  
so that we might see we are sheep of Jesus' fold;  
of hearing our name being called  
to come out from the darkness of our tomb  
and then sharing a meal with Jesus?*

Truly, what if?