

Lent 5

March 29, 2020

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Pasadena, California

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked at baptism, as the presiding minister begins.

Blessed be the holy Trinity, ☩ one God, who is present, who gives life, who calls into existence the things that do not exist. Amen. If you were to keep watch over sins, O Lord, who could stand? Yet with you is forgiveness, and so we confess.

Silence is kept for reflection.

Gracious God, have mercy on us. We confess that we have turned away from you, knowingly and unknowingly. We have wandered from your resurrection life. We have strayed from your love for all people. Turn us back to you, O God. Give us new hearts and right spirits, that we may find what is pleasing to you and dwell in your house forever. Amen.

Receive good news: God turns to you in love. "I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live," says our God. All your sin is forgiven in the name of ☩ Jesus Christ, who is the free and abounding gift of God's grace for you. Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ and serve you in righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Old Testament READING – Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will 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."

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them,



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and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

GOSPEL READING – John 11:17-45

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me,



but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

SERMON

In his vision, God led the prophet to a valley. In the valley was a whole host of dry, lifeless bones. It was a valley of complete death. The bones were completely dried up; no life was present anywhere.

Yet, in the midst of this lifeless valley, God asks the prophet a question: “Mortal, can these bones live?” It was an ironic question in the fact that the prophet knew that there is no power held by humanity that could reverse such death. The question asked was meant to drive the prophet to respond: “O Lord God, you know.” After all, what is beyond human power, is not beyond God’s power. The prophet knows this about God and claims it.

What happens next is the power of God’s word. It flows through the prophet and calls the bones to attention. Then, God’s word through the prophet creates flesh. Bone attaches to bone, sinews grow, then muscles and skin. Thousands of bodies appear, yet it is clear there is no life in them.

What is understood here is that, without the life force of God, represented here by the breath of God, the same breath that brought Adam to life in Genesis 2, a body is useless. This isn’t to say that body and soul are separate from each other, but it is to say that our very beings are tied to God. God gives us life, nothing else can.

So, God again has the prophet speak. This time the power of God’s word calls upon the breath of life to come from the 4 corners of the world and give life to these bodies in the valley. Isn’t it amazing to think that God calls upon the life force of all the world to come and give new life to these once dead bones?! And so the bodies come to life.

It is then that we discover the true meaning of the prophet’s vision. The vision is a physical metaphor for God’s promise to restore Israel. Israel is a point in its history where they have lost all hope. They are conquered, they are exiled, they are divided. And what is worse is that they know it was because they turned their backs on God and squandered the gifts given to them. So, in addition, there is a sense of shame and guilt among the people.

Yet, God, through this vision, assures the prophet that God is faithful to the promise of life. Thus the imagery changes from a valley of death to God opening graves. Think about it, in a cemetery all bodies are buried in the ground. But more than just buried, we also seal the bodies in a casket and that



casket is then sealed in a tomb-like structure. This cuts the dead body completely off from the living. Yet God's promise to the prophet states that God will break away the tombs and resurrect these once cut off bodies back to the living with new life. God's gift of new life will reunite all the living as God restores all of Israel to new life. In that new life, Israel will no longer be separated or exiled, and they will know of God's divine will.

I wonder how many of us feel like our bones are dry. How many of us feel like hope is lost? How many of us feel in exile and cut off? How many of us feel conquered by the coronavirus? We don't know how long this social isolation will last. We don't know what our economy will look like when the country is back up and running. We don't even know how many of our loved ones and community members will survive! It can feel hopeless right now.

Yet, this vision of the prophet told to us today is a sign of extraordinary hope. God's promise is life; God's commitment is life. We are God's beloved creation, and when it seems like death had claimed complete victory over us; God speaks a powerful word and new life comes forth. Even though the valley was full of complete death; it could not stop God from granting new life.

Jesus tells Martha in our gospel story today that: "I AM the resurrection and the life." Even though Lazarus was dead for four days, which meant any hope for revival was gone. It is another example of complete death. Jesus spoke a powerful word: "Lazarus, come out!" With that command Lazarus was brought back to life. Again, death could not stop the power of God's word; the power of new life.

As we prepare to enter into Holy Week, these texts remind us that, no matter how much death tries to conquer us; it does not have the power to hold back God's promise of new life. And we will once again be shown this as we watch Jesus give his life on the cross and placed in a tomb. Even there, God will again open up the graves and show us that, what was cut off from life, is restored with new life.

Just like the nation of Israel, God's promise of new life will also bring us restoration. Sure, we may not know when we will be able to gather again as a faith community. But God's promise is the hope that we will be reunited again. And when that time comes, it will be a joyous Easter celebration. Until then, we trust that God will find ways to show us visions of hope that will revive our bones and remind us of the gift of new life. Perhaps that hope will come through a prayer; perhaps it will come through a phone call or Facetime chat; perhaps it will come through some much needed rest and Sabbath. However God shows us these visions of hope, rest assured that where death seems impossible to overcome, nothing is impossible for God. Amen.

HYMN – 666 – What Wondrous Love Is This

PRAYERS



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Turning our hearts to God who is gracious and merciful, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

God of life, bind your faithful people into one body. Enliven the church with your Spirit and bless the work of those who work for its renewal. Accomplish your work of salvation in us and through us, for the sake of the world. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you love the world you have made and you grieve when creation suffers. Restore polluted lands and waterways. Heal areas of the world ravaged by storms, floods, wildfires, droughts, or other natural disasters. Bring all things to new life. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, show redemption to all who watch and wait with eager expectation: those longing for wars to cease, those waiting for immigration paperwork to finalize, those seeking election, and those in dire need of humanitarian relief. Come quickly with your hope. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you weep with those who grieve. Unbind all who are held captive by anxiety, despair, or pain (*especially*). Fill us with compassion and empathy for those who struggle, and keep us faithful in prayer. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, we give thanks for opportunities for this congregation to collaborate with our community in caring for the needs of our neighbors. Strengthen our ties with other local congregations, agencies, and services. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

God of life, you are our resurrection. We remember all those who have died and trust that, in you, they will live again (*especially*). Breathe new life into our dry bones, that we, too, might live with you forever. Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great.

According to your steadfast love, O God, hear these and all our prayers as we commend them to you; through Christ our Lord.

LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy.

The Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

