

The Sunday Missive – March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Hymn 512 Come gracious spirit heavenly dove

Come, gracious Spirit, heavenly Dove, with light and comfort from above;
Be thou our guardian, thou our guide o'er every thought and step preside.

The light of truth to us display, and make us know and choose thy way;
Plant holy fear in every heart, that we from thee may ne'er depart.

Lead us to Christ, the living way, nor let us from his precepts stray;
Lead us to holiness, the road that we must take to dwell with God.

Lead us to heaven, that we may share fullness of joy for ever there;
Lead us to God, our final rest, to be with him for ever blest.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAWCQQcy22g>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The 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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: 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 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."

So 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. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had

covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then 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." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then 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.' Therefore 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I 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.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord* ***Let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.***

O Lord, if you were to note all is done amiss* ***O Lord, who could stand blameless?***

But there is forgiveness with you* ***Therefore you shall be loved.***

I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for the Lord* ***In God's word lies all my hope.***

My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning* ***More than watchmen for the morning.***

O Israel, wait for the Lord* ***For with the Lord there is mercy;***

With the Lord there is plenteous redemption* ***Who shall redeem Israel from all our sins.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJvZ8qzW0e8>

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 203 There is a balm in Gilead

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,
But then the holy spirit revives my soul again. [Refrain]

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot preach like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all. [Refrain]

Don't ever be discouraged for Jesus is your friend,
And if you lack for knowledge, he'll ne'er refuse to lend. [Refrain]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fcMxI_6xsk

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that

he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

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

When 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." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The people 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. When 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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and those who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." And Jesus began to weep. They said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 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."

And so, many of those who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

Death is Dead -- Lent 5A

We heard a set of long and rich readings today, that thoroughly stimulate the mind and possibly challenge the patience. The metaphors get complicated in these passages, and they take their sweet time doing it. Ezekiel, forced into exile to the rivers of Babylon at the age of 25, tells a story that takes us sharply away from anything we might call everyday experience. Even the monumental stories of, for example, Noah and Moses, take place in contexts that we can at least partially imagine. Singular individuals they are, yes, in archetypally grand situations that beggar belief, but we can certainly picture how tough it is to be the number one leader of a big and important adventure or expedition like those two.

Ezekiel's narrative reminds me of campfire ghost stories, wherein the main context is random or obscure, and even the punchline or jist is secondary to the mood, the macabre details and the startling atmosphere of the storytelling, as in "I am the viper – the vindow viper – I've come to vipe your vindow!" The immediate message of Ezekiel's story is that Israel will once more rise from defeat and pain and shameful exile to strength and happiness and ownership of their own land – at least for a time. But what a colorfully bizarre way of telling us. A valley full of dry, busted up skeletons that reassemble themselves, sprout flesh and come to life? It's an awfully far-fetched and disturbing illustration, also arresting and memorably entertaining. Modern day practitioners of the genre include Tim Burton and Loony Tunes. But the underlying reality at work is the same as in the Flood and the Parting of the Waters stories: death will not have the final say when it comes to the power and intention of God. Although the over-the-top spookiness of his story might serve to complicate his simple message, Ezekiel wants us to understand that God means for God's people to live and prosper no matter how they have dwindled or failed, how far down they have sunk or been beaten.

Meanwhile the psalmist sounds a bit like a stock character in a theological melodrama: "Here I am Lord, I've hit rock bottom; I've been beaten down and feel like I deserve it. And I know if you were keeping score Lord you would most certainly condemn me. Indded, if you held all of us accountable for our thoughts and actions, there is no one who would come out squeaky clean. Give me your steadfast love anyway. For yours is the power to redeem, we have the wondrous assurance that you mean for us to regain life and prosperity no matter how far down we have sunk or been beaten." As with the prophet, so too for the Psalmist: Death, whether physical or spiritual is subservient to the power and intention of God.

St. Paul plays us the same song, but in a minor key. He addresses the same issue, wielding the metaphor with more passion but less entertainment value in his letter to the Romans. "There is no condemnation for those in Christ. The Spirit of Christ has set you free from sin and death." It is not that one will never sin. Nor

is Paul claiming the absence of physical death. He is proclaiming the ready availability of permanent spiritual vigor and precious hope to any of us who desire it, no matter how far down we have dwindled or been beaten. The flesh is bound to fail us, but the spirit has the choice of lasting vitality. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." So, whatever happens to the body, if Christ is in you, you will remain alive in the Spirit forever. Your times of waiting will be times of hope, even when they are also times of distress, mourning and pain. This metaphor is more strident and demanding than the one we heard from old Ezekiel, who's on about death being physically reversed. We have moved on from the spooky, bone-rattling ghost story that shows us God's indifference to death. Now we are being forced to admit that our cooperation is required in the determination of our fate. God's eagerness to help us, no matter how far down we are, and God's complete dominance over death don't mean a thing if we remain aloof, self-interested and self-reliant.

See how John blends the two ideas, not only reviving Lazarus' flesh at will, unwrapping the corpse like dry bones walking, demonstrating that neither physical nor spiritual death has dominion over God, but also making it plain that Lazarus' physical revival is a fleeting resurrection. Unlike Jesus' tears, Lazarus' physical revival is temporary, much like Israel's return to the temple in Jerusalem – despite what the Zionists may espouse. What is permanent is the spiritual foundation and companionship of God with all those who want it, wherever they may be.

Many who opposed Jesus came to believe, not just because of the temporary miracle of making dead people walk, but because of his tears. They were aware of encountering a power outside the dominion of death, who desired their welfare, regardless of who they were.

As we move into our own Passiontide – the time we expand our awareness of God's most demonstrative and complete participation in human experience – we can encounter Jesus more thoughtfully in response. God not only weeps when we weep and grieves when we die; God demonstrates in real time that we need not remain beholden to death and in fear of it. We too can find new freedom to defy our ever-drying bones, to set aside our outrageous betrayals, to live beyond our mortifying disappointments and give ourselves to our greater mission, which is the nurture of Creation in all its forms and personalities.

Lazarus will die again physically, but he and all of us who want to live for love, are part of an existence that knows no end. Like Israel's re-enfleshment in Ezekiel as the spiritual child of God, the promise of life to those who follow the way of Christ is permanent.

And now, from the poet Pablo Neruda, here is another angle on this question of death's dominion,

A Callarse (Keeping Quiet.)

Now we will count to twelve and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth, let's not speak in any language; let's stop for one second and not move our arms so much. It would be an exotic moment without rush, without engines; we would all be together in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea would not harm whales and the man gathering salt would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare wars, wars with gas, wars with fire, victories with no survivors, would put on clean clothes and walk about with their brothers in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused with total inactivity. Life is what it is about; I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never understanding ourselves and of threatening ourselves with death. Perhaps the earth can teach us, as when everything seems dead and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve and you keep quiet and I will go

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DS1caAlolYE>

Hymn 401 The God of Abra'm praise

The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;
Ancient of everlasting days, and God of love;
The Lord, the great "I am," by earth and heaven confessed:
We bow and bless the sacred name forever blest.

He by himself hath sworn: we on his oath depend;
We shall, on eagles-wings upborne, to heaven ascend:
We shall behold his face, we shall his power adore,
And sing the wonders of his grace forevermore.

There dwells the Lord our King, the Lord our Righteousness,
Triumphant o'er the world and sin, the Prince of Peace;
On Zion's sacred height his kingdom he maintains,
And, glorious with his saints in light, forever reigns.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmHZq-rowX4>