

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 9, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 130; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-44

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent. Next week will be Palm Sunday and together we will read again the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and then his trial. The following Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection, Easter... Jesus' Resurrection from the dead.

Today, both the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel point toward Easter. They speak to us about resurrection, bringing life where it was no longer. And both lessons, as well as today's Psalm, speak to us about faith and trust...our faith and our trust. So let me ask you a question.

Did any of the images in today's readings speak to you? Did anything resonate with something that you have been feeling recently, or perhaps something that you have felt at some point in your life? For example, have you ever had an experience similar to the experience we read about in Ezekiel? Have you ever looked at a situation or perhaps your whole life and asked yourself the question that we just heard asked of Ezekiel?

Walk with me for a moment down onto the valley floor where Ezekiel is standing. Look around at the dry bones that are scattered about you. Notice how dry they are and perhaps how broken. And as you look at all of those bones, take a few steps toward one in particular... take a closer look at it. And now look at some of the bones that are around it. Do they look familiar? Do they seem to remind you of something?

Perhaps as you look closely at those bones they remind you of a dream you once had for your life. Perhaps they remind you of a relationship that has died. Do they remind you of something? Perhaps something in your life right this moment that is not going the way you had hoped. As you stand here in the valley among all of those dried bones, what comes to your mind? What are you feeling?

And as you stand on the valley floor, hear a voice say your name and ask you: "...can these bones live?" After as you think about the question for a moment, what would your answer be? Do you believe that those bones can live? Do you believe that once again, breath and sinews and skin can come together and that there will be life? Do you believe that those bones, that relationship, that situation, that dream, could just possibly live again? When the question comes: "...can these bones live again?" ...what will your answer be?

These are important questions for us to consider. They are important to consider both for each of us as individuals, certainly, but they are also important to consider for those that we

come in contact with. For those we touch as “Instruments of Peace”. How we approach life, how we respond to life, and how we deal with those challenging situations that are sure to come up, is very important to consider. How we will answer the question: “...can these bones live?” is important, because at some point, we are going to encounter it, either in ourselves or in someone else. And when we do, we need some idea of how to respond to it.

But before we consider some suggestions on how to respond to the question of whether the bones could live again, let’s consider something else about challenges that is important. Challenges in our lives are sure to come, and they come in many forms. But when they come, are they always bad? Are challenges always likely to harm us? Remember, to become a great writer often requires that your early works must be rejected. To become a good tennis player requires that you play against players that are better than you, and that you get beaten. To become a top sales person you must experience a lot of rejection. Babe Ruth set a long lasting homerun record, but he also set a record for the most strikeouts.

In our Lenten study, “Bridges to Contemplative Living” we are seeking to learn how to live more contemplatively. This week in the introduction to session eight we read:

“The hallmark of contemplative living is a deepening ability to respond compassionately to all beings in all situations of our lives.”

And Karen Armstrong wrote:

“All the world’s faiths put suffering on the top of their agenda, because it is an inescapable fact of human life, and unless you see things as they really are, you cannot live correctly. But even more important, if we deny our own pain, it is all too easy to dismiss the suffering of others”

Suffering, challenges, broken dreams, happen. And in many cases they can become our servants for a better future. But how might we deal effectively with them when they come?

When asked: “...can these bones live?” Ezekiel’s response was: “O Lord God, you know.” Perhaps as Christians, it is good to look at the situation realistically and to acknowledge, as Ezekiel did, that only God, not us, knows the ultimate outcome of any situation. Ezekiel acknowledged that God was in charge and then he did what he was called to do.

Then, after remembering who is really in charge, we should pray. Listen to some of the words of this morning’s Psalm from the New International Version. The psalmist writes:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy...”

Whatever challenges that you may be facing, when you gaze upon the “dry bones” of your life, do these words sound like you? Are we that direct and honest when we pray? Do we really express our truest feelings to God and ask that He really listens to us and gets involved in our situation? Do we really let God know what is going on and how we feel about it, or are polite, somewhat formal and perhaps indirect? And after you pray and share your emotions and situation with God, what are your expectations? Can you honestly say that you feel what the Psalmist feels? Can we each honestly say with the Psalmist:

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word... I put my hope...for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption...”

The psalmist prayed from his heart and then he put his hope in God’s word. He trusted... and so should we.

In the Gospel this morning, both Mary and Martha trusted Jesus. They trusted that he could make a difference in their lives...and so should we.

Not long ago we heard the words of New Testament Professor William Barclay say:

“Jesus was the only person who could ever demand without qualification to be judged, not by what he said, but by what he did. The challenge of Jesus is still the same. He does not so much say, ‘Listen to what I have to tell you,’ as ‘Look what I can do for you; see what I have done for others.’”

J. B. Phillips, universally esteemed for his translation of *The New Testament in Modern English*, wrote:

“If Jesus Christ never lived or died or rose again, how do you account for the fact that, about A.D. 54, that is ten years before any of the Gospels were written, men and women were being changed in a place like Corinth, a by-word even in those days for immorality? Thieves, rogues, prostitutes, (and others) – all were being changed into honest men and women. Phillips continues:

It isn’t only these early Corinthians who impress me. It is the people with whom I come in contact, or who write to me. Some are young, some middle-aged, some old. They come from places as far away as Australia, Chicago, India. All tell me the same story. Christ has become to them a living Person, their strength and companion, the transforming influence in their lives...Perhaps, above all, that miracle that is theoretically unattainable is performed again and again...human nature is changed.

As we live out the course of our lives, we will face challenges. Things will not always go the way that we hope they will. There will be those times that we will look at our dreams, our lives or perhaps just one aspect of it and wonder: “...can these bones live?” And when those time come, which they surely will, remember Who is in charge...remember

to pray what is really and truly in your heart...and remember Easter...remember Who lived and died and rose again...for you ...and believe.

AMEN