



Sunday Devotion for Martin Luther Church

5th Sunday of Lent
March 29, 2020

A warm welcome to watch this devotion at
<https://youtu.be/3EWr5LDSBYk>

A. GATHERING

The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.

Welcome

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is the beginning of a strange time for the Martin Luther Community. Last week we said goodbye to Pastor Christian as he departs to his new call in German. This week we have learned that Vicar Caroline will not be able to return to Canada from Germany to complete her internship and our planned interim, Pastor Hille, will also not be able to join us. Amidst all this, our community is no longer able to meet in person.

Communities around the globe have been changed dramatically by the constantly changing adaptations that COVID-19 is requiring us to take to protect the people we love dearly. And while we are cut off physically from each other for the foreseeable future, it has been a blessing to be able to connect with many people over the past two weeks. Whether it is phoning people from the congregation, those connected to our ministries, or increased communication with my parents and sister, in some ways I feel more connected than I have in a while. I also realize those feelings will shift as the weeks of physical distancing continue, and there are many in our communities who are already feeling overwhelmed by missing those they care about.

The two readings I will focus on from the lectionary both talk about a time of waiting, of bones laying dry in a valley and of Lazarus laying dead in a tomb. From that time of waiting comes a spoken word that leads to new life. I hope these passages will bring you comfort for the days ahead.

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray:

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.



Vicar Jordan Smith

B. WORD

God speaks to us in scripture reading, preaching, and song.

Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths

I cry to you, O Lord;

²O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.

³If you were to keep watch over sins,

O Lord, who could stand?

⁴Yet with you is forgiveness,
in order that you may be feared.

⁵I wait for you, O Lord; my soul waits;
in your word is my hope.

⁶My soul waits for the Lord more than those who keep watch for the morning,
more than those who keep watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, wait for the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love;
with the Lord there is plenteous redemption.

⁸For the Lord shall redeem Israel
from all their sins.

First 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, "Prophesy 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, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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 11:1-45

The Holy Gospel according to John.

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.
²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

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.³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² 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."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.

P: The word of the Lord.
A: **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Sermon- Vicar Jordan Smith

On days like this, where we have two powerful stories from scripture presented to us in the lectionary, and where we have so much happening in the world, there are so many things that could be said. What I want to focus on today are two pieces of these passages – emotion, and word.

Emotion – because in times like this, emotions are high among many of us. While we have heard in our phone calls that many are doing well, that those who have lived through war and hardship are ready to face another challenge in life, we have also heard from others who are feeling a range of emotions. Loneliness, sadness, despair, but also times of joy, and celebration, and contentment. It is in our emotions that we feel the full breadth of experience of humanity. And in our passages today there is a lot of emotion.

I also want to talk about the word, the spoken word, because it is this word that changes things in our readings, and it is the word that has a chance to change us in the days and weeks ahead. While our community at Martin Luther gathers for Holy Communion once a month, many Christian communities celebrate at the Lord's table each week. We have entered a time where we can not gather for this sacrament, and while we will miss this way of receiving God's grace, we now have the opportunity to spend time centered on the Word and the benefits it brings.

For it is in the word that we hear receive comfort in knowing that God is with us and understands our emotions. That God is with us when we are living in a situation that is uncomfortable. Ezekiel is a priest in the old testament, whose role involves performing ritual acts, and is also a prophet, which requires "powerful truth telling."^[1] We are hearing a lot of powerful truth telling right now, from our government officials, health administrators, our leaders – who maybe in normal times it might feel like they are performing their ritual duties, going through the motions, but at this time are telling us some uncomfortable truths. Telling us things we don't want to hear. Giving us advice or updates that might seem scary, or negative, or irritating. These are the types of prophecies that Ezekiel was called to share throughout his career. And while these messages weren't fun to give, Ezekiel knew that God was guiding him, that God was present. In chapter 37 verse 1, he says "the hand of the lord came upon me", and in verse 2, "he led me all around them (the dry bones)".

1. Thanks to the ELCA World Hunger Blog for inspiration. https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/preaching_covid19_march29/

While things appear before us to be a valley of despair, God is present, acting through those called to lead us. God is present, witnessing the situation of us and those around us, being a part of the emotions we are feeling. John writes that Jesus travelled to visit Mary, Martha, and the deceased Lazarus. As he talks to Martha, and then Mary, and sees the sadness of all those gathered, we read that “Jesus began to weep.” John 11:35, is commonly known to be the shortest verse in the King James Version, two words, “Jesus wept,” and in these two words we hear that Jesus comes amidst our pain, witnesses our emotions, and feels them, being present with us as we grieve.

In our gospel reading, it is grief over the death of Lazarus. As the story is told, there is again powerful truth telling. Lazarus is dead. There is no confusion or potential that he is sleeping. In ancient Jewish belief, it was thought that the spirit of the deceased person hovered around the body or resting place for three days. In verse 39, Martha recoils at the thought of opening the tomb at Jesus’ command because Lazarus has been dead for four days and there is already a stench. Lazarus is dead, his spirit is gone, there is only a body left, wrapped in rotting rags and surrounded by a stench.

But when the tomb is open, after calling out to God, Jesus cries with a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!” I imagine the next moments must have been anxiety ridden for everyone. Did they hear a shuffling sound of footsteps first? Did they see slight movement in the shadows? Or were they quickly greeted by the sight of the dead man walking, “his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth.”? The words spoken by Jesus have brought a dead man back to life.

It is the spoken words of Ezekiel, prophesying the words of the Lord, that cause the dry bones in the valley to come together, for sinews to grow, for skin to come upon them. But Ezekiel notices – there is no breath in them. And again at God’s command, Ezekiel orders the four winds to breathe upon the newly formed bodies, and to put breath within them. Through this image of a field of bones forming life, God reminds Israel that God will always be in their presence, that God’s spirit will be placed in them, and as verse 14 states: “you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

God speaks and life is formed. Jesus speaks and life is resurrected. The word of God changes lives, and at this time of fasting, where we can not gather to share in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we can still share in the Word. The reformers who shaped the early Lutheran church understood the importance of the Word of God. They write that “Faith is sparked by the word.”^[2] Luther writes in his large catechism that “we believe in him who daily brings us into this community through the Word, and imparts, increases, and strengthens faith through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins.”^[3] Or from Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

We receive the Word when we can’t receive communion. So I urge you to take advantage of this time apart from each other to nurture your faith through the word. Listen to the weekly reflections offered on this YouTube channel. Read your Bible. Read the daily devotional that was mailed out to every family of the congregation. Put your children to bed each night with a story about Jesus.

2. *Book of Concord, Augsburg Confession, Article IV, par. 73.*
3. *BOC, Large Catechism, Creed, 3rd Article, par. 62.*

And know that amidst all that is going on around us, God breathes life into us. And Jesus weeps. Knowing that Lazarus will come out, Jesus shares in the grief of that moment, of those around him. We are called to do that in these days, to come together in this time and support each other, as God and the Word support us.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Our prayers this week come from the Lutheran World Federation. We pray together with people around the world. In times of restraint and physical distancing, when the body of Christ cannot meet in one place, we gather through the Holy Spirit in our many different places – house, apartment, room – and call out to you.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

Give courage and wisdom to national governments and local authorities to enforce public health regulations for the welfare of all and increase efforts to stop the spread of the virus that affects every human being.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

God, have mercy! Heal the sick, strengthen the elderly and vulnerable, protect all from the spread of COVID-19.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

God, have mercy! Support and protect all health care workers and all who serve the sick and those at high risk of infection. We remember in particular refugees and those serving them today. Reinforce all agencies that support public health.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

God, have mercy! Comfort and uplift those who are alone, isolated, oppressed by solitude and anxiety.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

God, bring us peace. Be with those who are celebrating their birthdays amidst in ways they could not have imagined. We remember all who are celebrating birthdays this week, including Ortrud, Patricia, Theodor, and Ashley.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

Fill each and every heart with that trust in your grace that frees us and binds us together in communion in the one body of your son, Jesus Christ.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

Send your Holy Spirit. Renew your church in its prayer and in solidarity with all its neighbors.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

Remember in your mercy all those who have died and will die today.

Hear our cry, O God, **Listen to our prayer.**

Trusting in your great compassion and unconditional promise always to be with us, we pray.
Amen.

C. SENDING

God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

Blessing

Now is the acceptable time.
Now is the day of salvation.
Holy God,
speaking, spoken, and inspiring,
bless you, unbind you,
and send you in love and in peace.
Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Share the good news.
Thanks be to God.

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