

03/29/2020 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Sermon: Revived When Hope is Lost.

Theme: God restores our strength if we will wait upon Jesus' love and compassion for us.

Purpose: We will draw strength from listening to God's direction and presence.

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14 The valley of dry bones, Ezekiel's promise that God will raise again those who were in despair.

John 11:1-45 The raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead.

Questions:

In what ways does our faith and relationship with God need to be “raised from the dead?” How is it we have given up expectation that God can do something different in our lives? What is necessary so that we can be people who see Jesus’ deep love and care for us even though circumstances are not going as we would hope? How do we live faithfully when we do not see how God’s promises might be fulfilled? What is our role in being the ones to whom Jesus is coming to do a miracle? How do we live as people who expect God to act rather than to be overwhelmed by our fears and despair?

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

<sup>37:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup>He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>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.’

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.’ <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup> 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.” <sup>12</sup>Therefore prophecy, 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. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>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.’

## John 11:1-45

<sup>11:1</sup> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup>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.' <sup>5</sup>Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, <sup>6</sup>after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

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

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

<sup>28</sup> 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.' <sup>29</sup>And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. <sup>31</sup>The 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. <sup>32</sup>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.' <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. <sup>34</sup>He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' <sup>35</sup>Jesus

began to weep. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' <sup>37</sup>But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. <sup>39</sup>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 for four days.' <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>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.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>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.'

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

#### Conversation Starters:

Even though Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother was in desperate need of his help, Jesus remained where he was for two more days. This is a crucial point of the story, that Jesus delayed responding and creates much of what challenges us in this passage. Have you been in a situation where you feel God is not responding to your prayers? Have you had times of feeling troubled and unsure of why God doesn't seem to be responding?

What do you think is meant when Jesus said that Lazarus illness would not end in death but in the glory of God? How does this connect with the passage from last Sunday when the disciples were asking whose sin lead to the man being born blind, and Jesus said it was so that God might be gloried?

A major portion of John's Gospel leading up to this point has been about Jesus' conflict with the Jewish people who were not willing to accept him. Jesus' tone and manner has been at times harsh, and other times confrontive. Suddenly in verse 33 of this chapter it shows Jesus' empathy with Mary, Martha, and even the Jewish people who only a short time earlier were wanting to stone Jesus to death. How do we reconcile Jesus' compassion and tears with his earlier tone of being confrontive and challenging to the religious leaders?

Do you think Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to be raised from the dead from the very beginning, before leaving from where he was two days before? Or do you think Jesus just knew that this was going to lead to God being glorified? When Jesus prays he speaks so that the crowd may hear him praying so that they may believe. Was the purpose of Lazarus' death so that Jesus might stand out as a miracle worker?

The story of Lazarus is a story of all hope being lost by some even though God's miraculous plans were already in motion. Have there been times when you experienced similar miraculous

and unexpected outcomes in a situation you thought was lost? What does it mean to believe when everything seems to be lost?

Ezekiel's vision as in the valley of the defeat many years before of Judean untrained conscripts who were slaughtered by a professional, highly trained, well outfitted Assyrian army. Do we have any parallel circumstances of defeat and humiliation which have shaped the identity of our nation? Are there other humiliating tragedies that come to mind that leave people emotionally scarred and feeling powerless?

What is the message of Ezekiel's vision to us today? In what ways is God putting us back together and pulling us from the place where we have been the most defeated and overwhelmed?

Notice that the miracle begins when Ezekiel does his part, to prophecy (speak God's word) to the dry bones, and then after Ezekiel prays to the "wind" or "spirit" to come into the people. What is the difference between doing the work of speaking to the bones and the prayer work of conversing with the Spirit of God?

What is the proclamation of message of hope for the world today? What message should we be sharing with the places feeling overwhelmed and over run by a force that is much greater than themselves? What prayers and conversations with the "wind" do we need to be having in order to be part of God's healing work today?

1. Our Lenten Series, the Journey from anxiousness and fear to the healing knowledge of God.
  - a. The whole point about miracles is that we don't see them coming.
  - b. Miracles are when we are out of control.
  - c. We always have to let go of our animosity and resentment if we are going to be part of the miracle.
2. The path has made a strange turn through some difficult valleys.
3. Ezekiel was in the valley of defeat, shame, and despair left behind for generations.
4. The important point to the story of Lazarus wasn't just that Lazarus was raised from the dead, but that Jesus wept and was moved by the sorrow of Mary, Martha, and even the Jewish leaders who had been ready to stone Jesus to death.
5. Preaching to the dead bones means speaking hope even when we aren't real sure ourselves. Preaching to the wind means spending time in conversation with God so that we are able to participate in the miracles that God will do.

Sermon:

It's a little overwhelming to remember that when we were choosing the theme and materials for Lent, we had no idea of where this path would take us. Our theme, as you may remember, is the path of Lent from fear and bitterness to healing, hope, and peace with God. Somewhere the path made a really strange turn and we find ourselves in a valley of uncertainty and confusion. The thing about this Lenten path, we are called to affirm that we aren't in this place because of

a mistake or failure, or because God wasn't paying attention. It's like I'm always picturing when I'm driving my Garmin is going to say, "Oh shoot, you were supposed to turn left back there; sorry I wasn't paying attention. Recalculating." In the same way, God has not made a mistake; this is where we are supposed to be. We just don't know why, and we don't know how this is going to affect our lives.

The passages for today have a purpose and message aimed at reviving hope. The problem that some will have is if you are looking for an intellectual explanation for why things are happening in our lives, these, and many other passages like them are going to be really dissatisfying. There is no clear explanation of why things happen. But then hope and despair are not intellectual, they are entirely emotional. Even when we completely understand what is happening in our lives and know what will change, we can still feel hopeless. Yet in other times when we are drawing our strength from God, even when we have no idea how things will work out, we can feel the peace and confidence that hope provides. We may be thinking we want to think our way through our fear, but truthfully thinking will never replace hope. Hope is what we need and it only comes from drawing closer to God.

The time right now is particularly challenging because at the present moment we are anticipating some really bad things, but for the most part we are okay. I don't want to minimize that some experienced real loss, but for the majority of us, we are inconvenienced but not suffering. We are worried but our worries are about things in the future. We can see that problems are arising, threats of illness, loss of life, and economic crisis, but most of us are suffering from this very odd mixture of anxiety and boredom. We are worried about what has not yet come and fearful for what we imagine may happen. So intellectually we are scouring the horizon for some assurance that things are going to be okay or clearer information about how bad its going to get. We watch television, seek information and try to work out what's happening because a part of our brain keeps telling us that if we knew a little more about what's happening, we would feel better. That part of the brain is not correct.

So if we are not going to think our way out of the feelings we are experiencing, where do we go? We go to God's promise of love and hope. We go to the need for a miracle. And this is the point where our image of God and belief in God's love becomes very important. If for you, God is an angry judge who punishes wrongdoers and is waiting to smite the wicked, then you aren't going to be looking forward to God acting in your life. Or if for you God is a far off entity in the universe, largely unaware and indifferent to any individual's situation, then you aren't really going to anticipate anything particularly useful coming from God. If you believe that God is our loving creator who gave us life, and whose spirit dwells within us, then you are looking for a miracle, and miracles are our source of hope.

Miracles are not very intellectual, but then at this point, neither are we. Miracles begin where human intellect ends. Miracles are not just good luck, they are God's action on our behalf. Miracles don't do what we ask, but they do what we need. Trusting in God means we don't

know what will be the way in which our healing and peace will be restored, but that miraculously, God's going to act in the way that will enable us to be restored and secure.

In the passage from John's Gospel, Mary and Martha have sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is very sick, near death. They need him immediately. They even throw in the extra barb – "Lazarus, whom you love;" 'you know, the guy who always welcomes you and makes sure to stock the food you like so that when you come by you can feel at home.' But Jesus doesn't leave immediately, he waits two more days. Now we have the aerial view of the situation and know that when Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days. The message was too late when Jesus received it. So, Jesus finished caring for the people he was with because Jesus knew that God would act. John does not give us a clear picture on whether Jesus knows how all of this will be worked out, or if he is just doing the next right thing to do in front of him. Times like now, I kind of like to think that Jesus is just doing what he knows to do immediately, and that he is trusting God with the big picture. I have to admit sometimes I think differently that somehow the Father has given Jesus the whole plan and he knows from the moment that the message comes to him exactly how it's going to work out. But I suppose in a time when we are calculating toilet paper and figuring out groceries, I feel better thinking that Jesus is just doing what he needs to do next. Either way Jesus does not do what the disciples think he should do, which would be to drop everything and run. But in the end it wouldn't have made a difference.

When Jesus returns to Bethany, emotional history comes to be central in the story. First he meets Martha, the one who is more focused on action and more direct. She doesn't mince words and just says, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus begins to try and show her a way to see God is acting, but she cannot see beyond her grief and her anger that Jesus wasn't there. This is the thing that is powerful about this passage, Martha and Mary both have their grief and disappointment which challenges their ability to see the miracle that God is beginning to do in front of them. The Jewish people, who only a chapter ago were wanting to stone Jesus to death, can't see the miracle because of their resentment and bitterness. This is something we need to understand about miracles. God is acting around us, but when we cannot see outside of our own expectations and our own judgment, we cannot see it. We have the choice between experiencing the miracles that God is doing or being resentful and bitter. We cannot see miracles if we aren't willing to let go of our demands that God act the way we think God should act. We have to quit clinging to our wounds and to release our grip on what we think is our right if we want to participate in the miracles that God is doing around us.

The path we are walking is taking us into a place where we've never been before, and this is really powerful miracle territory. We are being stripped of the illusion that we know what we are doing. We do not labor under the misconception that we are in control. We're truly unequipped for the times we are in. So we're probably in the best place to let go of our

expectations and demands, our resentments and past issues and see what miracles God has in store for us.

As the story in John's Gospel unfolds Jesus is powerfully sympathetic to the emotions of the people around him. The shortest passage in the bible which in the old Revised Standard version was only two words: "Jesus wept;" only begins to share the depth of Jesus' emotion. The thing about this though is that Jesus knows that a miracle is happening, but that doesn't mean he is indifferent to the emotions of those who do not understand that God is acting in their midst. Jesus is moved and feels the sadness that the people are experiencing. But not just with Martha and Mary, Jesus is moved by the emotions of the Jewish people who have come to be with Martha and Mary, the people who only a short time earlier were trying to stone Jesus to death. Jesus sympathizes and knows what they are feeling and it causes him great distress and grief. And then Jesus acts and a miracle takes place.

Jesus first begins with a prayer; noting particularly that this prayer is not his regular connecting with God prayer. This prayer is on behalf of the people who are standing by, particularly those who do not believe and do not understand. The point of the prayer is that they can know that it is God who is acting. Jesus was sharing with those who were unable to see what God was doing, that God was acting. Then the rest of the stories comes out as we remember it. Jesus calls to Lazarus and Lazarus comes out of the tomb. Mary and Martha see the miracle that was promised from the very beginning. Some of those who were there with them also saw the miracle. Sadly, those who were rooted in their own hostility and bitterness, those who were unable to be open to what God was doing, they didn't see a miracle. And they immediately made plans to put Lazarus back in the tomb he had just come out of.

The important point here is what kept the very religious, very confident people from seeing a miracle. Lazarus came out of the tomb for everyone to see. Those who were able to let go of their need for control, saw a miracle that showed God was acting and that the Messiah was in their midst.

But for those who were more connected to the resentment that Jesus had not acted in the way they expected him to act, for those who did not believe that God could do anything new that didn't fit with their plans and expectations, and especially for those who were caught up in their wounds, their judgment, and their bitterness, there was no miracle.

This is our situation as well, we can be part of the miracle or we can hold onto our worry, fear, and hostility. We can either accept that what has past is no more, and that what is to come will be under God's control, or we can stew in our own resentment. The problem is we have to work to be open the miracle.

When Ezekiel in his vision was taken the valley of bones, he was take to a part of Israel's identity, a key part of what defined Israel's sense of self. The valley was Megiddo, a place where a horrible and meaningless battle took place. Conscripts from Israel and Judea, by which I mean farmers, shop-keepers, and accountments went into the field of battle carrying their improvised

weapons, to face the Assyrians, who were a professional army, trained for years and equipped with weapons of a quality that was like no other. Assyrian swords would pass through a Judean shield without slowing down. The Assyrians showed no mercy and entirely wiped out the Israelites. For generations this became the shame of the population, a sense of who they were; overwhelmed and defeated.

Ezekiel saw a new vision of the people, that they would not longer be defined by what was past. They would no longer be the people who lost, who were defeated, who were forsaken. But this required work from Ezekiel, first even though he didn't know what he was saying or what the message was, he was to speak to the dry bones. The miracle came from God, but Ezekiel had a part in the miracle. Even though he didn't know for sure what he was saying, Ezekiel had to speak.

We are in the same place ourselves. Is this going to work out? Yes. But we don't know how. Will God intervene and do something that is beyond our capability. Yes. Do we know what God is going to do or when God is going to do it? Nope, not a clue. But that doesn't keep us from making the proclamation. And frankly the proclamation may have to be more in our attitude and actions than in our words. We need to live so as to proclaim hope so that we may be people who dwell in the miracles and hope that comes from God.

Ezekiel's story does go on by the way. Not only does he have to speak to the bones, but he also has to speak to the Wind, the Holy Spirit. Now you might think, "Doesn't the Holy Spirit already know that he's supposed to be there? Seems kind of unnecessary." But this speaking wasn't for the Holy Spirit's benefit, it was for Ezekiel's benefit. He needed to speak to the wind, or more specifically to speak with the wind and be present with God in order that the miracle could take place. Because without that component there might be flesh and blood but no life. We might be able to fix our basic problems but not restore the life and wholeness that a miracle is needed to bring.

So we need to learn something about proclaiming. Where we do not know or understand we need to be able to proclaim what we believe, that God is the God of miracles. We choose not to be dominated by our resentment, fear, and worry. We choose not to be defined by what is past and what is behind us. We choose to be present with God, and to proclaim that God's love and grace will bring our restoration, even if we don't know how it's going to happen. We don't know what's going on, but we know God, and God doesn't abandon us.

We need to connect with the Holy Spirit, to speak to God of our desire to see transformation and restoration. We need to speak to God of our desire for love to win. Then we can hope in the work that God will accomplish. Spend time opening your heart to God's Spirit, and speak of what you hope, what you fear, and what you see as our need.

God's promise is to walk with us, to transform us, and to restore us. We don't have control over when, how, or what it will look like. But we have control over our own way of thinking. We need to choose the miracle that we cannot control or even completely understand over our



resentment, disappointment, and fear. We need to choose to let go of what was and begin to open our hearts to what will be. We need to learn how to proclaim the hope we have, rather than feel that we need to know the whole plan before we offer hope to the world. Because if we wait, the miracle may happen and we miss it completely. But if we are people who will listen outside of the noise of our own inner turmoil and resentment, we will rejoice in what God will do.

Please join me in prayer. Jesus, we are not clear on what is happening, or what will take place. We are unsure of what is happening outside of our very narrow room and space. But you have promised that you are faithful, that your love is with us, and that you care about how we feel. Enable us to proclaim hope even when we don't understand ourselves. Share with us your love and grace. And let us have confidence in your work and peace. Enable us to speak with Your Holy Spirit and to be open to your work in our midst. Amen.