

First Reading

A READING FROM THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL (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, 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." 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 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. 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.

Gospel: 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 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. 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 the Jews 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." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews 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." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Homily – March 29, 2020 – Rev. Elizabeth Barnard, St. George's, Cadboro Bay

As I connect with you this day, I know that you are in many different circumstances in the midst of this pandemic.

For some of you, your lives have been relatively unaffected by the pandemic, for others, your lives have been turned upside down. Some are safe and well staying mostly at home and able to go out for groceries and essential items. Some of you are essential workers continuing to go out into the world day after day. Some of you are content to be mostly at home physically-distanced from friends, others are suffering loneliness and very anxious about how long this isolation will have to last. Some of you are (or have family members who are) healthcare workers who are going into the eye of the storm. Some of you are (or have family members who are) very vulnerable due to age or underlying illnesses and live in fear that COVID-19 could mean death. Others of you can be relatively sure that, even if you or your closest family

members became ill with COVID-19, you'll ultimately be just fine. For some of you this illness seems far off, while others have already lost loved ones to it.

I ask us all to be aware that in our community of St. George's and all across the world individuals are in all of these different circumstances. So, though we are all in this together, a range of emotions and experiences beset us.

From my conversations with you, I know you are doing much to care for one another, and I thank you for that. It is truly a gift to be part of such a loving community.

Both of the readings for today, in a sense, begin with the same concern, the same question: "In the midst of suffering and death, where is God?"

Ezekiel is speaking to a community in exile – their city is destroyed and their civilization seemingly stamped out. The Babylonian invasion of 586 BC essentially destroyed Judah's life as a nation. As we hear in today's reading though, through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises to restore them to life, and even to return them to their land.

This is, as many scholars point out, is on its surface a nationalistic and even ethnocentric text. We don't need to look too closely at history to know that nationalistic fervor can be extremely inspiring and utterly evil. What's the difference between God's promise to the nation of Judah to restore their flesh and bone to the soil of their native land and the popular Nazi slogan "blood and soil"?

You'll notice that in Ezekiel's prophecy the restoration of flesh and bone is not the restoration of life. The restoration to life comes from God's breath, God's Spirit. What do we know of how God's spirit empowers?

In Luke 4:17-19, we read of Jesus first "sermon". The scroll of the prophet Isaiah is given to Jesus, and he unrolls the scroll to find the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me *to bring good news to the poor*. The Lord has sent me *to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*'"

In times of great fear there is always the danger to turn against one another to protect ourselves. In times of great fear there is always the danger to blame rather than reach out in love to "the other". We should be suspect of any rhetoric that encourages us to be concerned merely about our own flesh and bone, for God's Spirit always calls us beyond flesh and bone to the spiritual connections that are truly life-giving for all. This is not the "Chinese virus" as some have labeled it; racist rhetoric will not hold it at bay, only working together as one world, one global people will.

I've heard the word "Apocalypse" used to describe this new reality of pandemic. Let us remember that the root meaning of apocalypse is *uncovering* or *unveiling*. What is being

uncovered in this moment? Perhaps what is being uncovered is the way that our societies fail to embody the justice and love that we thought they did?

The Lutheran theologian Deanna A. Thompson wrote a beautiful book titled, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* about her experience of discovering the life-giving possibilities of virtual connectedness when she was sidelined from in-person interaction by an incurable cancer. This past week, she wrote an [article](#) about how Christ can be truly present through virtual connection, and in it she states this:

“In his theology of the cross, Martin Luther insisted that God is present precisely where we least expect God to be. [Luther] encouraged Christians to think of God’s hidden presence in the pain and suffering on the cross, witnessing how God is at work in such unexpected places to bring redemption and healing.”

This invited me to consider how God is present in unlikely places in today’s readings. It might be obvious that God is present in the restoration of the people of Judah and in Lazarus coming out of the tomb. Where else might God be present?

- in the dusty valley of the dry bones before restoration seems possible
- in Ezekiel’s open ears and open heart, as he waits and listens for God’s message of hope
- In the pause between Jesus being told and Jesus arriving to Mary, Martha and Lazarus
- In Jesus weeping
- In Lazarus’ confusion as he exits the tomb still bound in strips of cloth

And if God is in these places, where might God unexpectedly be in this present moment in which we reside?

- in the 2 metres between us
- in the hearts of grocery store and pharmacy workers, sanitation workers, government workers, healthcare workers and others still willing to go out into the world to ensure others’ well-being and comfort
- in the opportunity to notice how much of our communal life has been turned towards producing, earning, acquiring and succeeding
- in the opportunity to learn about one another’s deeper concerns in a new way
- in the opportunity to consider ways of caring for one another we haven’t thought about before
- in the realization that God’s Spirit can knit us together as one body even when we are physically separated

Melinda Quivik, a Lutheran pastor and scholar writes of the story of Lazarus’ raising: “Many bindings in our world seem impossible to untangle, but every day the word of the Lord frees someone. That is the message of this story.”

It is easy to become tangled up in all the bindings of this world that we do not control – this leaves us feeling helpless. But to have faith is to trust that there is always a binding we can help

untie by opening a path for God's love to come in. God's Spirit goes beyond flesh and blood - even if we're quarantined in one room, we are empowered to spread God's love.

People who trust in God don't hoard. People who trust in God, find ways to care for others, whatever their circumstances. People who trust in God can sit with painful emotions – fear, sadness, grief, and anger - because they know that God is acquainted with every part of our humanness. People who trust in God turn away from the fear that separates us and turn towards trust that restores us to one another. People who trust in God, know that every moment is an opportunity to explore how we can live into the kingdom of love and justice that God wishes to bless us with.

I pray that we might allow this moment to be such an opportunity.

Please know that you are in my prayers daily, please know that the staff of St. George's are here for you. Please do not be hesitant to reach out to someone in the community of St. George's for connection or for assistance with groceries or other essential items. Please do not hesitate to reach out to someone to offer connection and support. Please remember that both receiving and offering assistance are ways that we together experience God's loving Spirit working among us.

Perhaps my most favorite prayer in the Bible is that of King Jehoshaphat who essentially prays: we don't know what to do, but we know who God is. We don't know what to do, but we know God is faithful." Encourage one another. "Be the glimpse of the presence of God's love" to one another. Trust that, even virtually, God can make us one body connected in Spirit by faith, hope and love.