

Weekly message (COVID-19) for March 29, 2020

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. I miss all of you and am sure you're missing each other, too. I'm so glad we are all one in Christ, knit together in one body by our baptism into his love, "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

Every morning there's a new message from Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson. Today's words of wisdom: "This is a marathon, not a sprint! All of the uncertainty and additional stress can take its toll. Take care of yourself; sleep, eat, pray, exercise, talk to colleagues and friends. Take care of your neighbors."

That may seem hard to do while we're physically distancing ourselves, but we can be creative! It's easy to keep in touch with social media (and I'm not sure exactly what those media are: facebook? twitter? tweets? podcasts? A new one I've seen on-line is "zoom" gatherings. I do none of those and regret that neither congregation has the ability to "stream live worship services." (You can find some on TV or other congregations on-line.)

But even for those of us who do nothing more than email and text, we can be creative in those aspects of technology. We can all pray, and perhaps we could all pray through our congregation's directory: pray for each person/family individually. Lift their name up to the Lord in silence and see if he gives you an insight into what they might need or how you might serve them from a distance. And use this time apart to read some scripture! If you want suggestions as to where to start, let me know!

One family in our parish has members out of state who are recovering from the virus. My cousin in New Jersey knew a family of five; only one survived the virus. It's a very real threat to the entire world. But God is greater than COVID-19. And St. Paul reminds us that "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

Two thoughts from members of St. Stephen. Dick Gray suggests that we all pray every Sunday at 10:00 for five minutes. Give thanks to God for his constant and ever-present love, and pray for healing for our nation and all people everywhere. Ruth Paul shared with me that she asked an acquaintance if she lived alone, and the answer was, "Oh, no, the Lord Jesus Christ lives with me."

- If you have an email address you haven't shared with us, please do so to minimize the cost of printing and mailing these weekly notes/sermons.
- Please remember to mail or drop off your offerings to support the church in our ministry. Thanks to those of you who have done that already!

Lent 5, March 29, 2020 (Jn 11:1-45; Eze 37:1-14; Ps 130)-COVID-19

Today's gospel tells how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. You've heard the story: Lazarus had two sisters, Mary and Martha. (Remember them? Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to him teach; Martha complained to Jesus that her sister wasn't helping fix dinner; see Luke 10:38-42.) Jesus was a couple of days' journey away when they sent him word that their brother was sick. Instead of going immediately to Bethany, where his friends lived, Jesus dallied for two days, then said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," they said, "A short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you. Why do you want to go back?" . . . Jesus told them Lazarus was dead. Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, so we may also die with him."

My colleague in ministry, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, shares these words about Jon 11:7-8, 15-16:

Jesus faces the death of his beloved friend. He suffers the loss, and in love, he is death's victim. Yet after two days—on the third day—he rises to go to Lazarus, to be victorious over death. But Thomas knows—later we'll call him "Doubting"—but he knows: first you have to die. Victory over death can only be attained by entering death. Jesus will have to die, a little bit, in his powerlessness, in his deep, helpless sorrow, in the sisters' grief and anger.

Go with the Risen One and die with him. The paths of righteousness (For God's sake) walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This is the journey toward the cross. Through the tomb toward the glory. Through the dying to the rising. Only in the depths of his loss will Jesus touch the power that is beyond him. Only when he weeps at death can he command life. -- Let us also go, that we may die with him (Unfolding Light, 3/24/20.

By the time Jesus and the disciples get to Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Important historical note: it was believed that a body dead for three days or less could still “awaken.” After four days, it was definitely dead.

Martha went out to meet Jesus and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, **I AM the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.** “Yes, Lord,” she said to him, “I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Martha went back to the house to call Mary, saying, “The Teacher is here.” When Mary reached the place where Jesus was, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus saw her weeping, surrounded by the other Jews who had come to her from Jerusalem. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus began to weep.

He followed them to the tomb, a cave with a stone laid across the entrance, and he said, “Take away the stone.” “Lord,” said Martha, “already there must be a stench, because he had been dead four days.” [The King James version: “Lord, already he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days.”]

Jesus said, “If you believe, you will see the glory of God.” So they took away the stone, and Jesus looked up and prayed, “Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me, but this is for the benefit of the crowd standing here, so that they may know that you sent me.”

Then Jesus called with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, hands and feet bound with strips of linen, a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

More words from Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*Death, we are certain, is final, a wall.
But Jesus says death is not final at all:
Not a wall but a curtain, a hallway, a door,
A passage to something uncertain but More.
Death is a darkness and death is a dawn,
A deep letting go, and a bright moving on.
The door is unlocked; if you push, it will give.
First you die, Jesus says, first you die, then you live.
Help me, God, by your grace, every moment, each breath
In and out, to receive the new birth we call death,
Like Lazarus, swaddled, and just coming to,
Awake from the birth canal, risen and new.*

If we were in worship together, the readings would have begun with Ezekiel's story of the valley of the dry bones (Ezek.17:1-14):

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones." [Prophe-sigh is a verb, meaning "to speak the word of God." Prophe-see is a noun, meaning "the word of the God."]

"Prophecy and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

Steve Garnaas-Holmes’ *Unfolding Light* is an on-line devotional. At home I also read daily devotions from the Methodist publication *Disciplines*. This week’s author is Rachel G. Hackenberg, United Church of Christ minister, who must have written her meditations at least a year ago. But how timely are her opening words:

“The situation in Ezekiel 37 seems extreme; yet many of us have experienced, witnessed, and survived such utter devastation. We have witnessed the complete disruption of life, the dismantling of everything familiar, the place from which life cannot continue as usual” (*Disciplines*, 2020, p. 110). Can you doubt that the Bible, even the Hebrew scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) was written for all people everywhere in every time??

Ezekiel was a prophet during the Exile, the Babylonian Captivity. He was taken captive at the beginning of the siege, around 598 BCE (before common era; same meaning as B.C., before Christ). He served in Babylon as a prophet of the Lord from 593-571 BCE.

I quote again: “The ancient kingdom of Israel has been torn apart by international war, shifting empires, diplomatic games, and competing religions. Prophets and politicians disagree about which empire to trust as an ally. Prominent leaders are exiled. Families are separated. Faith seems lost without a stable community to sustain it, without a Temple, without the clear presence of God. To Ezekiel and his audience, those days feel like death, like hope evaporating under a relentless sun, like dry bones scattered in the dust.

“Today in our own lives these days feel like death—when life is scattered by unforeseen events, when faith can’t find its breath amid the chaos, when the way forward seems impossible between a rock and a hard place. God asks Ezekiel: ‘Is new life possible even now when the people despair? Is renewed faith possible for people whose spirits have suffocated from despair? Can community be rebuilt among people who are separated by fear and violence?’ Ezekiel replies honestly, ‘I don’t know; but God, I believe that you know.’

“Ezekiel confesses that he himself cannot envision possibilities for the dry bones. But he believes that if life is possible, God is the one who can envision it and bring it about.

“When nothing seems certain but chaos, when life has lost its footing and faith has lost its imagination, we can confess that our future still holds something good, even if we do not know what it is. God knows” (end quote).

The texts from Ezekiel and John’s gospel are book-ends about new life through the *breath* (Hebrew *ruach*) of God and the Spirit (Hebrew *ruach*) of God. The dry bones were raised to new life, but it was new life on earth. They were *resuscitated* by God through Ezekiel.

Lazarus was also *resuscitated* by God through Jesus. Both of these stories point us toward the **resurrection** of Jesus, and ultimately our own resurrection.

The appointed psalm for March 29th is 130: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are to be feared (revered). I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.*

This is God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth! This is Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who for our sake became human, who lived and preached and did good to all kinds of outcast people; who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, and who rose from death to the eternal life prepared for him and for us. This is the God of glory who is with us now during the uncertainties and discomforts of our days. This is the God who waits for us in his eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God!