



March 29, 2020 | Lent 5A

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

Sermon: Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

These readings are so poignant. They are so poignant always, but especially now. (First of all, thank you, Clarke, for reading. It is so good to see you and to hear your voice. Thank you.) These readings are so poignant, and they really speak to us now, to how we may be feeling and how we may be reacting to the situation around us.

I heard--did you hear?--as Clarke was reading from Ezekiel that "our bones are dried up; our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (Ezekiel 37:11)...and here we are distancing ourselves from one another to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Did you hear also Ezekiel's response to the Lord there in the valley of dry bones? "Mortal," the Lord asks, "can these bones live?" What a question, right? No wonder Ezekiel responds famously, "Oh, Lord God, you know." He's probably thinking, "I hope you know...Please know the answer...It's your own question, please know the answer." Ezekiel there in that valley of dry bones is nearly speechless, dumbfounded, probably exhausted--all feelings with which I am sure we can relate.

And in the Gospel, did you hear Martha and Mary wailing at the loss of their brother? There is nothing like the loss of our beloved. Did you hear also in their wails their acknowledgment of Jesus' power? Their fear of Jesus' power? And then their very valid question, "Lord we know you could have done something. Why didn't you do something?"

Did you hear also Jesus weeping? Jesus weeps. Jesus weeps of course at the loss of his friend. Though he is God, he experiences the deepest emotions just like any of us would. He is troubled in spirit just like any of us would be. In fact, I would say *because* he is God, he experiences those emotions and that troubling of spirit all the more fully, for there is nothing we could feel that God himself has not already felt. There is nothing we could experience that God has not already experienced. There is nowhere we could go, no loss we could sustain that God in God's self has not already experienced. How amazing is that?

I want to spend a little bit of time with the psalm. Because all of the readings are so powerful, we may well glance over the psalm. But there it is. It begins, "Out of the depths I cry to you." And in the reference to the depths and other words that are in the original language (and you know me, so you know I'm going to reference the original language here), there are several parallels to Jonah's experience in the belly of the whale--Jonah who had run away from Nineveh, who had run in the other direction when God called him, and finds himself by God's grace not drowning, but safely and incredulously in the belly of the whale.

Throughout that incredible journey it stands out to me that Jonah regularly remembers Jerusalem. Consider this line at the beginning of his story, as he recalls, “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you in your holy temple” (Jonah 2:7). So there he is in the belly of the whale, remembering Jerusalem, remembering the temple, remembering the worshipping community of which he is a part. I know that we can all relate to this sense of Jonah being drawn back to his people, of remembering his people, especially in their worshipping community--not out of mere or simple nostalgia, but because his heart *belongs* with them. Even and especially in his fear and tremendous anxiety (because that is all that I would feel if I were ever in the belly of a whale), he is feeling drawn like a magnet to his people in Jerusalem, and he longs for the day that he can join them again.

Importantly for us today, Jonah (and we hear this echoed in the words of the psalm) orients himself, even when he is underwater, toward Jerusalem. He orients himself. He is full of fear and anxiety, he is railing questions at God, *and* his heart is drawing him back again and again toward the God who created him and the community of which he is a part.

I think also of the epistle today, that “to set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the spirit is life” (Romans 8:6). Now these words were written by Paul, and we probably know that Paul is often a thinker and writer of polarities, of “either/or”, of dichotomies. To me, this spectrum of flesh and spirit has never ever been an either/or but a both/and, because of course we are of the flesh-- *and* of course also we belong to God and our hearts orient toward God.

So, at this very moment of course we are afraid. We are in awe, and we feel tremendous anxiety at the fragility of our flesh and the insidious transmission of this virus. *And* may our hearts be drawn to God. Even and especially in our fear and anxiety, it is in God that we live and move and we have our being, just as truly as we do in our flesh. Might we remember especially in our fear that our whole selves – body, mind, and spirit – belong to one another *and* belong to God. Thanks be to God.