

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

Lent 5A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
March 29, 2020
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God Is Right Here

When Rebecca picked us up from the airport 18 days ago, she said “You’re coming home to the land of the plague.” 18 days ago. It feels like a lifetime ago and little did we know then, that we would all be isolated in our homes, that the shops and restaurants on Winslow Way would be shuttered and that you’d be watching a handful of us make church, from your living rooms.

It’s been said over and over, but I’m still saying it... these are very strange times, strange and tender times, times that are unprecedented. It’s very hard not to be with you, not to see your faces, not to be able to wrap my arms around you or shake your hand or bow to the Christ in you. Last Sunday when you came to hear the tower bells and receive a blessing, it was Dave and Karena and their kids Kala and Kawika who rang the bells for you. Kala, bless her little heart, came running toward me as her mama held her back telling her she couldn’t do that, telling her it wasn’t safe. That’s not normal. It’s not normal for us to treat one another as though we are dangerous to each other. We need to keep our distance, there’s no question about that. But we shouldn’t pretend that it’s normal and we shouldn’t expect to come out of this unscathed. This way of living is changing us in some hard ways and some beautiful ways too. It’s different for each of us – introverts are, for the most part, happier with this way of living than the extroverts are, but this isolated life is impacting all of us and it is essential to recognize that and to do what is needed to care for ourselves as we make this journey together. It’s not the Lenten journey we expected to make, but it is the journey we’re on, and we are definitely on it together.

Today’s readings are particularly poignant in light of what’s going on in our world right now. They are filled with heartache and with a deep and holy longing for God. Ezekiel’s vision is a prophecy for the utterly bereft people of Israel, a people that had lost their land, their king and their temple. They felt as though they had lost their God. They had been without for so long they thought they could never come back to life. “Our bones are dried up,” they cried, “our hope is lost, our story is over.” And Mary and Martha were absolutely heartsick having lost their brother, so distressed in fact, that they actually blamed Jesus. It wasn’t just that they’d lost their brother, it was that Jesus hadn’t showed up. Where were you, Jesus? If you had been here this never would have happened. Have you ever felt like that? Do you feel like that now? Where are you, God?

The heartache of what we’re experiencing these days can seem unbearable and can certainly overwhelm us if we let it. We must be careful with ourselves, and kind. I don’t mean oblivious or polly-anna-ish but I do mean careful. It’s important to take in information in ways that are helpful, not ways that overwhelm. One of you told me recently that you decided to turn off the

news... I thought of that as the goodness of a Lenten fast. In Lent we fast from the things that distract us and keep God at a distance. It isn't the heartache that keeps God at bay. Even in the midst of all of our heartache and fear and grief, God is right here. But if we don't stop the constant chatter of statistics, dire predictions and sensationalized suffering, we will never be able to see that God is right here.

While the connection might not be immediately apparent, there is something very important about the miracle of Lazarus coming back to life on that long-ago day in Bethany. Martha knew he'd be resurrected at the last day, but Jesus gave him life that very day. And that, my dears, is a very important part of this story for us in these difficult, strange and tender times. God is giving life this very day. God is right here, right now, in the midst of all our frustration and anger and heartache and hurt. No, God isn't eliminating the plague. God is imbuing healthcare heroes with courage and a life giving Holy Spirit. God isn't silencing the deniers. God is inspiring those who never thought they would speak out, to speak out and to act. And no, God isn't dropping ventilators down from heaven. God is giving us strength and courage and a spirit of love that compels us to do whatever it is we can do to help, whether that means not being with the people we love the most in the world or going to the factory so more ventilators can be manufactured.

God is not reaching down to manipulate the world. What kind of God would reach down to do what is being done in the world today? For that matter what kind of God would reach down to do what is being done in the world every "normal" day? Nearly 15,000 children die of starvation on a "normal" day. Of course God is not reaching down to manipulate the world... we know this. Our God is the God of love, and I believe that God's heart is breaking just as our hearts are breaking for the ones who are sick, the ones who have died, the ones who are scared, the ones on the front lines. In times like these, we need to remember that God incarnates, not just in Jesus, but in you and me too. God incarnates and that's where God is right now, incarnate in you and in me, and in doctors and nurses and grocery store checkers and sick people and dying people and my dear friends who are hospital chaplains and social workers. God is right here, incarnate in the world, in every act of compassion and mercy and love.

I've heard from and about so many of you and mostly you sound as though you're doing pretty well making your way through this time of great uncertainty. I know its harder for some of us than it is for others. We don't know how long this will go on – we do know it will be well beyond Easter, but really, we don't know. There is some very good news though! Bishop Rickel wrote on Friday to tell us that what we've all been doing these last weeks to keep people safe and to keep the virus from spreading, is working! Seattle is flattening the curve and that is very good news indeed. The escalation is slowed and while we're no means out of the woods, the peak has been pushed out, giving the healthcare system time to catch up. We are doing our part. Staying home is saving lives. Thank you.

This very day, God is bringing dry bones back to life. Our story is not over, our story begins anew everyday with the God who says...

I am going to open your graves, O my people. I am going to open your graves and raise you up. I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live. I will bring you home from the places of exile, and there I will live among you. And you will know that I, your God, have done this. You will know that I, your God, am a keeper of promises.

Amen.