

March 29, 2020; 5th Sunday in Lent

Opening Sentences

In these days we ask, *'can our hopes live?'*

And you whisper to us,

*'look to the buds on the trees eager to burst;
notice the flowers poking their heads out of the dirt;
watch the children chalking spring on the sidewalks.'*

In these moments we wonder, *'can our compassion live?'*

And you tell us,

*'wipe the tears of a worried father over his son's illness;
ease the weariness of a mother facing a long shift at work;
shop for the neighbor who has no family.'*

In the shadows of each night, we cry out, *'can our love live?'*

And you sing to us,

*'witness the touch of a wife on her husband's papery skin;
pay attention to the birds which rush into the sky before spiraling down;
share the words you are given to offer to the empty-hearted.'*

Silence is kept

Let us pray--

Creator of life:

bring us hope.

Mourner of the dead:

take away our fears.

Refresher of dry lives:

bind us to God forever.

Call to Reconciliation

We are fearful in these moments, and so lose faith;

we wonder what tomorrow will bring, and so lose our trust in God;

we see and hear (and share in) hurtful deeds and angry words, and so lose our humanity.

So, let us wait for God's mercy and grace, as we come with our prayers for forgiveness, saying,

Unison Prayer for Forgiveness

We are scared, God of our lives. There, we have admitted it. Our days are spent in isolation, even when we are with family. We wonder if you are with us or, like Jesus, are you taking your sweet time to come into our emptiness. We stand behind the stones of fear and worry that they have been rolled over the opening of our hearts, leaving us in the shadows from which we can see no live.

Yet, the good news is that you are indeed with us, God of our days.

Yet, the good news is that you have come, Jesus our Brother, to weep with us and over us, to roll away those stones, *to call us into life.*

Yet, the good news is that you cradle us in your peace, Spirit of Gentleness: rocking us to sleep on troubled nights; opening our eyes to the grace of each morning; filling us with the love and hope we can share with everyone around us.

Yet, the good news is still good news, and so may we trust, believe, hope, and live as your people. Amen.

Silence is kept

Assurance of Pardon

Can our hope live? Put your hope in God, dear friends, for God offers us that love which never fades, that life which never ends.

Wait for God, God does not fail us. God's hope, God's love, and God's grace are forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45 (selected verses)

Sermon *"Resurrected Hope"*

Our Choral Anthem for today (which is posted separately on the church website) is the late 19th century hymn, *It is Well with My Soul*, originally penned by Horatio Spafford.

You see, this hymn was written after several traumatic events in Spafford's life. The first two were the death of his *four-year-old son* and *the Great Chicago Fire of 1871*, which ruined him financially (he had been a successful lawyer and had invested significantly in property in the area of Chicago that was extensively damaged by the great fire). His business interests were further hit by the economic downturn of 1873, at which time he had planned to travel to Europe with his family. But in a late change of plan, he sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire. While crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship *sank rapidly* after a collision with a sea vessel and *all four of Spafford's daughters died*. His wife Anna survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "*Saved alone ...*". Shortly afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write the words of the hymn as his ship passed near where his daughters had died.¹

If you listen to the hymn with Spafford's real life story in mind, you realize how incredibly remarkable—and what a courageous act of *faith*—this hymn is. It was, in reality, (with the exception of his wife, Anna) the only thing he had left in life, as a result of several devastating events.

I want you to think about these things in terms of our two scripture readings for today, Ezekiel 37 and John 11.

First, Ezekiel. This familiar and often-preached text identifies the *condition* of the people—and God's ability to *restore life*. Not unlike the creation narrative, in which God's Spirit was moving across the *abyss* and God's Word create *order out of chaos*, God, through *commanding the voice of the prophet*, **transforms desolation** into *new creation*.

Also, like *the creation of humanity* who, being made *from dust of the earth*, were *lifeless* until God *breathed* into them, these *fallen* soldiers were *formed* but stood *lifeless* until God, through the proclamation of the prophet, *gave them the breath of life*.

I think this is interesting because *very often* we look at a situation and the condition appears to our eyes as *this valley full of bones* appeared to the eyes of Ezekiel.

¹ Wikipedia

We wonder, for example, during this pandemic if we will ever be able to get back to normal, whatever that is? Who isn't wondering whether the economy, our jobs, our families, our schools are going to be able to go back to the way they were? Who hasn't wondered whether those bones of loss, of worry, of hopelessness, will ever come back to life?

Our fears rattle around in the attics of our minds, and we wonder can they be knitted together? Can the sinews of hope wrap around us and give us strength? Can the Spirit - that Spirit of grace and hope and newness, come and breathe life, new life, into us? Or have we been completely cut off? Have we become a people who have lost all hope, who have fallen away in this exile of isolation.

The prophet who saw those bleached bones of his ancestors who died on that forced march into exile, says our God is going to bring us new life; our God is going to bring us new hope; our God is going to bring us new grace; our God is going to help us create community when it seems that we are separated from one another endlessly.²

In a similar way, in John 11, we encounter the words, "*now a certain man was ill.*" Of all this issues that tend to be gleaned from this text, rarely do we focus on *Illness*, as identified in the opening sentence of this narrative. This story interweaves issues of *body, spirit, mortality, faith, and belief*.

You see, once Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany, Jesus engages in critical conversations about issues of *belief and faith* with Martha and Mary. The fact that Jesus *wept*, even as Martha, Mary, and others *wept*, is an acknowledgement that loss and death are accompanied by deep feelings.

Grief, for instance, is the emotional pain we feel as a result of loss. But because most of us have been socialized to fear death, we see death *as a point of no return, as a warning sign* that says, "*Stay out!*"

Death is also thought of as an *intrusive and powerful* enemy. A paradigm shift, however, that declares death as a part of the *continuity* of life can death from

² Lee H. Butler, Jr., *Fifth Sunday in Lent, Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Westminster, /John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2013, pp. 163, 164

being seen as an *enemy* to be *feared*. And that is what Jesus does here—he attempts to *reframe* Martha and Mary’s understanding of death as *sleep*. Sleep tends to be understood as necessary and purposeful and not to be feared. By reframing death as *sleep*, Jesus purposefully shifts their understanding of death and simultaneously *their belief in the power of God*.

The musical genre of *spirituals* in the African American religious tradition captures this idea well. For example, there is a spiritual that combines elements of *this story* with elements from the *Exodus story* that seeks to encourage *sufferers* to believe in the power of God to deliver us from oppression. The spiritual declares, “*Mary don’t you weep. Tell Martha not to moan. Pharaoh’s army drowned in the Red Sea.*”

It encourages believers *not* to hold onto suffering and *have faith* that God will powerfully deliver us from trouble and restore us to life.

Just as Lazarus is awakened and called forth from the tomb *by the power of God through Jesus*, we *also* may look to God’s power to *restore us to newness of life*.³

Friends, as we live through these days of physical and social isolation due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, we realize that John 11 (and Ezekiel 37!) are *our* stories;

they are about us;

now

it is *us* inside that

dank, dark tomb:

stinking of fear,

wrapped in the bands

of loneliness;

blinded by the handkerchief

of weary worry.

now,

we hope,

we pray,

we yearn,

we listen

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 167

for just a footstep,
 just a tear dropping on the ground,
 just a whisper of Jesus
 pacing before the stone,
 growling in his spirit
 in anger and frustration,
 before he cries out,
 in hope and joy and life,
 "*come out!*"
now,
 we are not casual bystanders;
now
we are Lazarus
*waiting . . .*⁴

It is, indeed, *well* with our souls ...

God in Community, Holy in One. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith *The Apostle's Creed (Traditional)*

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayers of the People & the Lord's Prayer

Let us pray for the whole world
 for all creation, for every living creature
 for plants and flowers, for animals and for
 fragile human beings.

⁴ Thomas J. Shuman, *The Watchdog*, Lectionary Liturgies, Year A, March 29, 2020

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Let us pray for those who suffer
the sick and dying, for sorrow, and for the loss
that separates us from the love
of the eternal God.

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Let us pray for the nations of the world
for all people, for the land and water
that sustains and renews life.

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Let us pray for the leaders of nation and cities;
May they remember to lean into you and to
listen to your words.

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear Our Prayer.

Gracious God protect those who have no place to
live and no one to love them. Help them to know
you, and to know love.

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear Our Prayer.

We offer up our prayers of concern particularly
for those we love, family, friends, and others.

Fill us with Your Spirit.

Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear Our Prayer.

For all the blessings of this life we offer thanks,
help us to have generous hearts and giving spirits.
Help us to be your hands in the world.
Gracious God, in your mercy,
Hear Our Prayer.

We are bold to pray the prayer our Lord taught us, saying ...

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending

And now,
may the peace of the rolling waves,
the peace of the singing stars,
the peace of the silent mountains,
be with you now
and in all the days to come.