

Sermon on Raising of Lazarus and Valley of Dry Bones

Preached at CSJB on Sunday, March 29, 2020 by Sister Monica Clare, C.S.J.B.

Lessons and prayers: http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent5_RCL.html

The passage about the Valley of the Dry Bones from the Book of Ezekiel, as well as the story of the raising of Lazarus, both provide a reminder of the unfathomable magnitude of God's power. This reminder was very necessary to the people for whom these scriptures were written, and it is certainly necessary to us in the uncertain and anxious times where we find ourselves today.

Ezekiel's prophecy about the dry bones occurred when he was living in exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. After the Babylonians had conquered Israel and carried Ezekiel and most of his fellow Israelites into captivity, it seemed that all was lost. Their nation was no more, the temple of their great and powerful God, Yahweh, had been completely obliterated. Just like every other nation on the losing side of wars in the ancient world, Israel seemed doomed to assimilate into the culture of the conquering empire and lose all traces of its identity and more tragically, its worship of Yahweh.

But Ezekiel's message to his fellow captives was that all was not lost, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. The language here in the text says that he dreamed of preaching to bones that were "very dry," meaning they were not only dead but that they had been dead for a long time. And God tells him "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.'" God then goes on to instruct Ezekiel to preach to the bones "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord."

Can you imagine how improbable this prophecy would have seemed when the exiles heard it? Their hope was long gone, and yet their God was still telling them he was with them, and that he would accomplish the impossible.

The raising of Lazarus also reminds us, as it reminded the early church, of God's power to triumph over insurmountable obstacles. In this passage we see Jesus triumphing over death, which is the ultimate unconquerable foe.

When Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, he does something that confuses the disciples. Instead of rushing to Lazarus' side to heal him, he waits two more days. And he explains here that these events will be unfolding as they should, for a purpose. "So that the Son of God may be glorified through it." When he hears that Lazarus has died, he responds by saying "For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he is moved to tears by the grief surrounding the death of Lazarus but he knows that it had to happen, according to God's timing, so that his disciples would see that he was the Messiah and so that the chain of events leading to his own crucifixion and triumph over death would be set in motion.

Jesus raises a man who had been dead four days. Like the very dry bones of Ezekiel's dream, the possibility of healing and restoration was long gone, and all hope seemed to be lost. But God reminds us in both of these stories that if we believe in him, hope is never lost. Jesus tells Martha "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." And he asks her an important question: "Do you believe this?" and she says "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

And that is a lesson to us now, as we face a pandemic that seems to be an undefeatable foe. It threatens to rage out of control and bring suffering, death, and destruction of everything we know. Even in times like these, we can still reach out to our God and pray, as the Psalmist prays here in today's reading: "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice;" and if we believe, he will not only hear us but he will help us.

This is the God of our understanding – a loving God who has plans for us that are far, far beyond what we see in front of us today. A God whose timing and methods we will never even begin to understand in this plane of our souls' existence. Our God is a God of vast and

incomprehensible power – a God of miracles who can turn the course of events around, against all odds, in an instant.

He may not do exactly as we ask him, or act exactly when we want him to act, but he loves us and will save us, according to his own ways – if only we believe that he will.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, help us, we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting. *Amen.* *

** Episcopal Church. The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979). p. 472.*
(Image: View from a window at CSJB)