St. John’s Adult Forum, Fifth Sunday in Lent (March 29)

[As our Adult Forum is unable to meet on Sunday mornings, here is the handout we would have used last Sunday, expanded to include some of my teaching notes (rewritten into logical sentence form), a few other interesting quotes, and questions for reflection. – Steve]

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

1 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.
2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.
3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."
4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.
5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
6 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."
7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.
9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."
10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.
11 Then he said to me, "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.'
12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.
14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

While this passage likely occurs among today’s lectionary readings because of the long-standing tradition of seeing the reanimation of the dry bones in relation to the resurrection of the dead, in its original context the vision of Ezekiel has to do with the restoration of the Jewish exiles living in captivity in Babylon to their homeland. It is in that sense a physical restoration; but Ezekiel stresses that it is also a spiritual restoration of renewed depth with God.
It is therefore also about God’s ongoing faithfulness to the promise made to Abraham (which we heard about earlier in Lent): while the Jewish people have suffered the destruction of their former kingdoms and way of life, that doesn’t mean that God is finished with them. Rather, the promise remains, and they may rely on God’s ongoing presence and intention, a message of encouragement as they continue in Babylonian exile: “This too shall end, and a revival of new life will occur.” As the Psalm for this morning puts it,

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
    For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
    and with him is great power to redeem. (Ps 130:7)

Thus for those who say in verse 11 that hope is lost, life is over, and they have been “cut off completely,” Ezekiel’s message is one of renewal and courage, and a call to trust that the “dry bones” they have become will again live and be animated by the spirit of God.

It is worth considering this message in relation to the current situation in our own lives, or any situation that threatens to reduce us to dryness and hopelessness. Such times are when we most need to turn to God’s strength, crying out with the psalmist,

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
    Lord, hear my voice! . . .
    I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
    and in his word I hope. (Ps 130:1-2, 5)

QUESTIONS: How can you be a person of hope, sharing that hope with others in a trying time? [The following partly adapted from Christ is for Us p.73:] As you look at your community and situation, what “dry bones” can you identify that appear impossible to put back together and regenerate? Where do you see signs of new life?

Romans 8:6-11

6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.
7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot,
8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.
10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.
In a further development of the message of last week’s epistle lesson from Ephesians, with its emphasis on living as children of, and within, the light of Christ, this week’s lesson contrasts flesh and Spirit. It’s worth keeping in mind Paul’s words in the similarly-themed passage from Galatians: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (5:25). The result of this new life is to leave behind values and desires that have a basis in an exclusively human focus and result in death (verse 6a) in favor of those that characterize the Spirit, and result in life and peace (6b).

**QUESTION**: What practices, disciplines, and attitudes help you to keep your mind set on the Spirit and its ways?

We could say—modifying the saying from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (“To thine own self be true”)—that here Paul is telling his readers, “To thine own true self be true”: if we are in the Spirit, and the Spirit dwells within us, then to continue living according to other desires and values than those of the Spirit would be untrue to who we are in Christ (10). The contrast of death and life also suggests that to follow the ways of the Spirit is to live a life with a future, rather than wasting our focus, time, and effort on actions and attitudes that are not of that future, and therefore will pass away. The passage suggests the latter choice would be foolish, given that we know of the future promised us through the Spirit (11) if Christ is in us (10). In that sense, Paul’s words here resonate with those of Jesus in Luke’s gospel concerning gathering and storing up heavenly treasure that cannot be lost (12:22-34).

This doesn’t mean acting other-worldly in the sense of ignoring the world and, as the saying goes, being “of no earthly good.” It means the opposite: living in a way that shares the fruit of the life of the Spirit, and brings greater peace into the situations and relationships of this world. The words of the first stanza of the poem “The Prayer of St. Francis” (not written by Francis of Assisi, but nicely representing his vision of life) suggest what this would look like:

*Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.*

This is particularly applicable in challenging times. For example, the early English historian and biblical commentator Bede (673-735; commemorated May 25), spiritually applying the verse “Arise, north wind, and come, south wind; blow through my garden that its fragrant spices may flow”*(Song of Songs 4:16)*, encourages us to recognize that the winds of challenge in our lives can actually enable the “fragrant spices” of our faith to spread outward and affect the spiritual atmosphere of the world around us.

**QUESTIONS**: What opportunity does the current situation provide for your faith to spread outward into the lives and situations of those around you? What might God be able to do in
and with these current challenges, and what role might you play in that transformation by being “an instrument of peace”? 

John 11:1-45 [Given the length of this passage, we will consider only a few of its meanings.]

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.
2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.
3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."
4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."
5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,
6 after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.
7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."
8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"
9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.
10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."
11 After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."
12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."
13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.
14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead.
15 For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."
16 Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."
17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.
18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,
19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.
20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.
21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.
22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."
23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."
24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."
25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"
27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."
28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."
And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.

Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

Jesus began to weep.

So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The final portion of “The Prayer of St. Francis” quoted above—"Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope; Where there is darkness, light; And where there is sadness, joy”—exemplifies what Jesus himself brings to the family and friends of Lazarus in this passage.

But first there is a delay during which time Jesus, although told of Lazarus’s sickness, chooses not to go immediately to assist. As a result, he is reminded by both Martha (verse 21) and Mary (32) upon arrived that Lazarus would not have died had he responded promptly. The crowd also make the same complaint (37). But Martha, although questioning Jesus’ timing, nevertheless expresses faith in him and in his authority (22).

QUESTIONS: The passage reminds us that divine timing is not our own, and divine ways are not necessarily easy for us to discern. When have you found this to be the case in your own life, and how easy was it to maintain your faith at those times? What or who helped you to do so?
The crowd is shown mourning, and Jesus is also described as crying in verse 35, perhaps partly out of compassion for their grief. Yet Jesus views the situation not as one that has come to a tragic conclusion, but as one with possibilities, capable of bringing new life. He promises that Lazarus’s illness will lead to God’s glory (4); he tells the disciples that the situation will be an encouragement to their faith (15); and his actions ultimately function as an embodiment of his claim to 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” (25-26). Remember last week’s gospel lesson, in which Jesus described a situation not with a result clause, but a purpose clause? Here, too, the situation for Jesus is not a closure, but an opening. The outcome of his intervention is the return to life for Lazarus (whose name, appropriately, means “God helps”), and within the gospel of John a foretaste of the far more profound events of Holy Week and Easter morning.

QUESTIONS: How can you help others to view situations not as conclusions, but as possibilities; not as closures, but openings for God to work? How do you respond to those who scoff at such an attitude?

Easily lost in the many details of this passage is Thomas’s powerful comment in verse 16, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” In the preceding chapter of John, Jesus has spoken of his death; and here Thomas (so often unjustly called “doubting” for wanting the same proof of Jesus’ resurrection as the other disciples) shows his great love and commitment to follow Jesus even if it leads to danger and death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (commemorated April 9), in his challenging book The Cost of Discipleship, speaks of the commitment required of disciples:

Such Grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person their life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. . . . The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a person, he bids that person come and die. (47, 99; inclusivized)

Bonhoeffer, who chose to return to Germany from safety in the United States at the start of the Second World War, and who ultimately died in a concentration camp as a result of his stand against Hitler and the Nazi program, understood the demands faith in Christ can make on a person. While we are unlikely to face such a sacrifice, it is important to understand that our discipleship will involve such things as taking up the cross, “dying” to the things that separate us from God, and living as counter-examples to the more spiritually problematic aspects of our own society and institutions (see Matthew 16:24-28; Romans 6:1-14). Thomas’s response here is a worthy example.

QUESTIONS: [Partly adapted from Christ is for Us p.79] Looking at the characters in John 11, identify how each one responds to the death of Lazarus, and to Jesus’ actions. How do Thomas’s words speak to you? Note how the responses of Martha and Mary differ and how
they are similar. How does Jesus respond, and how does his response change throughout the story?

As we conclude this final Lenten lectionary study, I hope anyone who has been using these materials the past few weeks has found them helpful. – Steve