

*John 11:1-45, 2014, 5<sup>th</sup> Lent*

Our time in the season of Lent is growing short now. Next weekend will be Sunday of the Passion, or Palm Sunday when we make the final turn toward the cross.

We will mark the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem with all the fanfare, and then by the end of the service our eyes will be looking ahead to the last Passover, the Garden prayer, trial and the cross..

Holy Week will begin.

Looking from here I can envision the marking of each of the last days of Jesus' life.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; the quiet before the storm and then the terror of Thursday and Friday washes over us.

In the story from the gospel of John we hear today we reach a pivotal point in Jesus' story as well.

At the close of this story there are two significant things that happen before Jesus goes to Jerusalem:

1. Jesus is anointed by Mary, Lazarus' sister, with costly perfume. This is preparation for His burial.
2. The Chief Priest and the Pharisees call a meeting of the council during which they officially decide they have to kill Jesus to save the rest of Israel from the Romans.

The raising of Lazarus is essentially the end of Jesus' ministry.

You may remember that Jesus' ministry began at a wedding where He turned water to wine, and now ends at a funeral where He raises the dead.

Each of these are signs so that those who witness them may believe;

Believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God as Martha proclaims.

Two of our lessons for today, the Gospel and the OT lesson, are tied very closely together in their presentation of vivid pictures of the contrast between life and death.

Centuries apart these authors present to their communities a message about life and death that may not be so obvious in some ways, but is clearly evident in others.

They both help us to understand, to define death in a way that binds us to God today and forever more.

In a vision God takes the prophet Ezekiel to a valley filled with very dry bones. Human bones are lying all around, from those who had been slain perhaps in some battle.

It is a picture of death.

God tells Ezekiel to prophesy and gives him the words to say.

Ezekiel does what he is told and the bones begin to rattle and come together, bone to its bone.

Then tendons and muscle come on the bones, and then skin covered them, and there were human bodies lying there on the floor of the valley.

But there was no breath in the bodies. There is no life there.

So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy about the breath.

Come from the four winds O breath...

and the winds blow from all directions and breathe the breath of life into the bodies lying there on the valley floor.

And they lived and stood up!

They were given breath and life by God!

Jesus, in our Gospel lesson restores life to a dear friend who has died and has been in the grave for four days by the time he gets there.

All hope of help from Jesus has been thwarted.

Mary and Martha both say the same words to Jesus when they meet him upon his arrival;

“If only you had been here my brother would not have died.

All hope is lost.

It is interesting to know when you hear this particular story that in that day there was a belief that the spirit of a person would hover over the body for three days during which time there might be some hope for resurrection.

Jesus arrives on the fourth day.

All hope is lost.

“If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

These words were spoken by both Martha and Mary when they first met Jesus. But we come away with a very different feel and understanding from each of them.

When Martha comes to Jesus he takes Martha to school so to speak and they have this theological conversation about life and death and resurrection and she had all the right answers.

She understands it all in her head.

She doesn't seem to be comforted.

But when Mary comes out to meet Jesus you hear a very different conversation, and you see a very different approach to Jesus.

Mary falls on her face at Jesus' feet, she cries and makes the same statement about Jesus not being there. Upon hearing and seeing this Jesus is greatly disturbed and says, come on, lets go see where Lazarus is buried.

I wonder if Jesus had to have both of these discussions with these sisters to care for them the way each needed to be cared for in that moment,

before He could go on with raising their brother.

This may say something about the diversity of faith expression we see among people even today.

But, Jesus calls Martha, Mary, in fact all his disciples to belief through this resurrection they were about to witness.

And many of the Jews who witnessed what happened came to believe in Jesus as well.

"Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God..." those are Martha's words,

and it becomes the belief of many by the end of the day.

We come away thinking, believing that this being brought back to life is a good thing, but stop and think about it for a minute.

Imagine for the sake of argument what these who were brought back to life in the Ezekiel text have to look forward to?

Dying again.

What does Lazarus have to look forward to? Yes more time with his sisters, more time with Jesus;

I am sure his life was changed by being raised again, but he too has to look forward to dying again.

That is if you define death as physical dying only.

But what if you define death in another way.

What if you define death as separation from God, or a broken connection with God,  
and life as connection with God.

We can free ourselves from our focus of the physicality of death and give credence to the spirituality of life and death.

There is physical death and life illustrated in the story of Lazarus and in the story of the slain dry bones in Ezekiel.

But, there is spiritual life, a connection with God represented in the work and power of God who breathes life back into Lazarus and into the dry bones.

When we define death only as the physical dying then the words from a devotion I once read have great meaning.

“There is no place lonelier than the grave.

It is the abandonment of body from soul, of loved ones from one another, of humanity from God. We dread the grave’s darkness, its seeming finality, its gaping uncertainty.”

What we can learn from these lessons is that it is God who gives life through the connection He has with us.

It is God who calls for the four winds to come and breathe the breath of life, the breath of His Spirit into you, into this congregation, into this world

Lazarus is dead in the grave and can do nothing but receive the power of God to give him new life.

Jesus comes to the tomb with the power of God over life and death and calls Lazarus out of the grave.

You have received the breath of life from God.

In our Lutheran understanding of Holy Baptism we say that we die in baptism, and that we die in daily repentance and God raises us to new life.

Sustain your child with your Holy Spirit...

That is the prayer we pray in baptism.

Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

This is the promise in the words of our baptism service.

The call to faith is a call to die, so that God's power might be made manifest in giving you life.

That power is for you personally. It is to be the life sustaining, strengthening power of God alive in you, working love for you, your family, community and all the world.

That dying and rising, that faith, that power of God works also in the ways God breathes the breath of new life in our community of faith.

Consider the many ways God has breathed new life into our congregation. Consider where we were 5 years ago.

You may have felt like the dry bones lying on the valley floor. God tells Ezekiel that the bones are the whole house of Israel, dried up, hope is lost and they are cut off completely. This relates directly to the Christian Church in this day and time.

As a congregation you may have at times felt like Lazarus in the grave, dead, no breath of life.

But no matter we have had new flesh hung on us. There may have been some bone rattling along the way, but God said: "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..."

God called the four winds to come and breathe into us the breath of new life and we have stood up.

God continues to breathe that spirit into us and calls us forward.

This year we have a Long Range Planning Team working to envision the future God has dreamed for us, to see how God is providing for that future and set us on a path that will make that vision of God a reality so we can continue to make Christ known in the lives of all the people who enter here and who we serve.

You are going to be an important part of that, so be watching and listening for them to call you; then come and help out.

In the mean time watch for ways to help with our ministry now and keep that team in your prayers.

By the grace of God we have been called from the grave, we have received the breath of new life both personally and communally for the sake of Jesus Christ and the world.

Let us give thanks for the life God has given.

Almighty God, we come before you in awe of what you can and have given and done for us. We are humbled beyond all we could imagine. We know that you are the source of all life and we give you thanks for the new life you have given each of us personally, and as a fellowship of faith, a community of your people. Enable us to see life as being bound to you through your Spirit, and through your Son Jesus Christ who calls us back to life.

We ask that you give us the strength and power of your spirit to be faithful to our calling, and understanding of what we each may do to bring your kingdom into this community and the world.

Amen