

Sermon Preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Lent 5A

A certain man was ill – Life offered in the midst of Death

A certain man was ill.

So begins the story.

A certain man was ill – one whom Jesus loves and indeed is dead by the time Jesus arrives.

The people around are consumed by grief. Martha and Mary come to him. There is weeping, and Jesus himself is disturbed in Spirit and weeps.

This is not an easy situation for any in the story, even for Jesus.

The grief is there and it is raw.

And in the midst of grief is the overshadowing of violence, of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and death.

And yet in the midst of it Jesus can declare 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...'

Jesus' focus in the midst of death is on life, on being life, on calling people to life, naming the certain man as Lazarus and calling him out to life from his tomb.

Even when greatly disturbed coming to the tomb, in the face of his own looming death he calls Lazarus to come out from his grave and commands the community to unbind him and let him go.

In the midst of death there is life.

So also the reading from Ezekiel today that fits hand in glove.

Both of these stories talk about death, about the inability of human beings to do anything about what is out of their control – their own mortality, the dry bones of grief and fear.

And how much do we resonate with those dry bones with the daily overwhelmings of the nightly news, and the overshadowing of this pandemic.

There is the physical isolation, the upheaval of all of our routines and the physical isolation many of us feel.

It is easy like Lazarus to feel locked in our tomb.

We can feel like the Israelites off in exile, a long way from home and safety, seeing the dry bones of hopelessness and cry out from the depths with the psalm writer.

Yet all these readings speak of life coming even in the midst of death.

Even if we can do nothing, are limited, are anxious, alienated from each other the Divine acts to bring life, to bring meaning, strength and hope.

Ezekiel speaks to the people of Israel in exile.

God speaks through him to those who have lost all hope.

Jesus speaks to those weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, to bring Lazarus out of his grave.

The certain man, one of us, becomes named by Jesus and is called out. The gift of life comes to Lazarus to remind us that Jesus has the gift to offer us a quality of life now, to unbind us from what traps us, to call us by name and set us free.

Many of us are feeling confined in staying at home.

Many of us are anxious by the change of routine, the stripping away of our lives' normal patterns, of our normal distractions.

Yet perhaps even in this place we can find the gift to *be* differently, to reach out to each other differently, to love in new ways, to place our mind on the Spirit of life as Paul says as God dwells inside each of us.

We can wait actively as the psalmist says, - I wait for the Lord and in his word is my hope.

God can restore and renew us.

I am the resurrection and the life says the Lord. This is not from some hazy time in the future, beyond death, but is for now.

These words as Howard Wallace says, this resurrection is 'to raise our broken spirits, of bodies as good as dead, of hearts that lack strength and courage, of communities that are fractured, of relationships that have waned, of people who have lost hope' and all of us in the living of these days.

The risen life of God's loving presence in our midst reaches into our lives giving new life and hope.

This is the risen presence of Christ's life with us now, that joins us together, that keeps us together, that is closer in us than breathing.

God says as he does in Ezekiel:

I will bring you back

I am the Lord, I will open your graves and bring you back.

I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live.

Take heart in the life that Jesus gives us, even in these days:

And somehow in the deepest of silences it begins:

*In the great silence
the flowers seeded and grew,
the rain fell, the land took a breath,
exhaled.*

*The sun turned on its wheel
heedless to the forecast doom.*

*In the great silence
the leaves folded, took their queue
and detached from the branch,
to become the first fruit
of a fallen carpet
destined for mulch.*

*In the great silence, north and south,
the seasons changed,
exchanged batons.*

*The earth, on its axis, followed a path
long trodden,
defined by millennia past.*

*And in the great silence
the people burrowed in,
appeared on occasion for air,
and breathed secure for knowing the earth
carried on its resolve,
resolute in purpose.*

*And in the great silence
the planet rested,
the people rethought their focus
and slowed,
unfolded from the weight of lament and fear,
and returned as a world newly formed.*

*And in the great silence,
the people rebuilt their altars,
with the memory of the lost
freshly engraved,
and with the lessons of the earth
and their treasures preserved
the people conceived of a new way.*

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Living Tree Poetry
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*Lectio*ns:
Ezekiel 37.1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8.6-11
John 11.1-45