

Reflections on the Fifth Sunday in Lent

We are enduring an unprecedented national and international shutdown that leaves many people uncertain and fearful for the future. This week's news even featured pictures of the Pope praying alone in St. Peter's Square. But this week's lectionary lessons place our current fears into a larger context. As disturbing as the news might be, frankly it is nothing like the angst experienced by the people of God when Judah was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. Hearing their cry of despair, God gave Ezekiel a vision of the valley of dry bones - the people of God coming back to life. Recognizing that God did restore them, we can join with the Pope and all the people of God in confidently praying that he will restore today's afflicted nations.



A Solitary Pope at Prayer in St. Peter's Square.

One of our members, a young lady in her 80s, told me that she has seen nothing before like the national and world-wide shutdown over the COVID-19 virus. Many people are worried about their health as well as that of friends and family. People are understandably worried about their jobs and businesses. Today brings news that the Federal government is about to launch an unimaginably large \$2 trillion stimulus package, causing those that take the long view to worry about our national debt.

Into this bleak situation, for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the standard lectionary offers two remarkable lessons, both about God bringing new life from hopelessness and even death.

The Old Testament lesson is Ezekiel's vision of the valley full of dry bones coming back to life, found in Chapter 37. The scattered dry bones are a symbol of the destruction of Israel. The southern kingdom of Judah had been destroyed and its people had been carried off into exile and imprisonment in Babylon. Through the vision given to Ezekiel, God promises the restoration of their national existence and a return to their homeland.

The exiled people, dead in their idolatry that caused the exile, will be raised to new life when God returns them to their land.



Ezekiel & Valley of the Dry Bones - an illustration from a book by Martin Luther.

The second remarkable lesson is John 11 - the raising of Lazarus. If it was unexpected that Israel would come back from national death, it was even more unexpected that Lazarus would come back.

The raising of Lazarus from physical death is the miracle of miracles, foreshadowing Christ's own resurrection on Easter. The English scholar George Beaseley-Murray wrote: "Yet to all with ears to hear, the resurrection of Jesus spells 'sure and certain hope,' as John 11:25 states."

But before Jesus performed this great miracle, Martha complained to Jesus saying: "Master, if you had been here my brother would not have died." She knew Jesus could heal her sick brother, but God's power to bring him back from the dead was understandably beyond her imagination.

Because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, Christian life today is in Christ. It is something realized today, and in the future. We are formed into a community by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Beaseley-Murray comments: "...we do well to ponder the sign of Lazarus, and grasp afresh the present relationship of faith as well as the joy of hope for the future."



The Raising of Lazarus

These lessons were meant to give hope as we walk through the dark days of Lent. Surely these lessons give cause for hope as we walk through difficult days now.

Lectionary readings for Lent 5:

Ezekiel 37:1-4

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

These lessons can be found at: lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu