

Lent 5A; Ezekial 37:1-14; Ps. 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

The twins were eight years old. Hannah and Jeffrey had given me the honor of escorting them around the art museum where I sometimes taught classes. They wanted to see the mummies in the Egyptian section. They had questions for me as I remember. As we moved closer to the sarcophagus Jeffrey turned to me and said, "Don't say the magic words. I don't want to see the mummy."

Dead had a logical and fixed place in his world view. Anything coming back from the dead place would be scary – or awesome – depending upon your point of view. Whether you take today's lessons as literal or metaphorical something of tremendous importance to our faith is going on.

And not just for us. The Ezekial text and the belief in an afterlife – a resurrection of the body – was held by some in Judaism for many years. That is the belief that Martha professes in her exchange with Jesus when he comes to the burial site of Lazarus. Ezekial's vision of dry bones in a wilderness valley mirrored the condition of a community in exile that was gradually losing hope. Their lifelessness needed a powerful God intervention. We are meant to know who's in charge of restoration, whose magic words will call for transformation. God's breath coming from every direction – north, south, east and west – will restore.

This passage is about God's intention to go on creating with dust and breath, an ongoing work that is not limited to the past. And surely we need this hope as well for this has been a springtime of death all over the world – Japan, Libya, Afghanistan, Congo, Ivory Coast. The places of conflict and new death tolls arrive with the morning news. So mortality is not a metaphor for us; it is a daily reality for some. In this parish Pat has just lost her mum. Others are sitting at bedsides in hospitals and nursing homes; our prayer list grows. This is our daily bread and it is also where the Lenten journey ends. "The road to Easter leads through a cemetery," said one commentator.

These texts are an invitation to look at our own lives, at those places where we live in graveyards. Faith says we do not have to live there. God's love will call us into new life. My Monday musing on these texts packed a punch said one parishioner. I repeat it now. Come away from death, from bones and stench, from grieving and exhausted relatives, tested faith. Come away from what is dead in you. Cry out to God. Beg, plead, speak, call. Ask for breath, for your name to be called by Love. Wait for it, for God's purpose to stand strong again in you. Assume those watching will be terrified.

Frederick Buechner says that when Lazarus heard the voice of Jesus calling him from the tomb, he responded not knowing or caring which side of the grave he was on. I am wondering if that is true for us. Are we listening hard enough to Jesus now in all the places where we have died to new possibility. This is about us; it is about the body of faith, the church. It is about the world too. Earth Day is Good Friday; the national church has asked us to look at what has been death dealing for the planet. North, South, East and West, in and beyond us, we should be listening for the voice of love to call us to new life.

After the Lazarus event, Martha's confession, Jesus' contempt for death, the authorities determined that Jesus and Lazarus would be put to death. It was one thing for a troublesome itinerant wonder-working rabbi on the fringes, in backwater areas of the Galilee. Now there is a collision course and a final

testing; we are heading for Jerusalem. The powers of darkness seek to separate us from larger and brighter truths, like Love summoning us into new places.

So what are the magic words that summon us from a body of death?

Br. James Koester, SSJE, ended his final meditation last Saturday in this way:

“You’ve done some pretty wonderful things in your life. And God Loves You.

You’ve done some pretty courageous things in your life. And God Loves You.

You’ve done some pretty heroic things in your life. And God Loves You.

You’ve done some pretty ordinary things in your life. And God Loves You.

And if you are like me, and you are like me, you’ve done some pretty hurtful, dreadful and stupid things in your life. And God Loves You.

God loves us not in spite of ourselves but because we are God’s own.”

Listen to the voice of Love and become Love. Leave your tombs. And don’t be afraid.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera