

LENT SUNDAY V "A"

MARCH 28/29, 2020

Two years ago the Ames Mine hosted an open house part of which was a bus tour into the mine itself. At one point as we were far under the surface of the earth the bus driver stopped the bus and turned off all the lights. So completely black was the darkness that I could not see my hand held only an inch from my face. The thought occurred to me that when the Scriptures speak of the darkness of the grave this is what the authors had in mind. Absolute blackness. Today's Scriptures place us in situations of absolute blackness: the physical blackness of death experienced by Lazarus as his body lays in the tomb; the blackness of grief and hopelessness of Martha and Mary; the dry bones on the plain in Ezekiel's vision in the first reading.

Lazarus has died, despite the efforts of his two distraught sisters, Mary and Martha. John tells us that Mary and Martha independently greet Jesus with the same statement, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Who of us who has desperately prayed for a miracle healing of a loved one has not experienced the same emotion or uttered the same complaint to God as Martha and Mary when our prayers for deliverance for our loved one have seemingly fallen on deaf ears by God?

To Martha's pleading complaint Jesus straight up tells her that Lazarus will live again because of who he is. **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. Do you believe this?** (Jn. 11:25-26). Martha immediately acknowledges on the spot that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Then she runs to get her sister Mary.

To Mary's similar pleading and tears, Jesus gives no grand revelations. Instead he asks to be taken to the tomb. From the depths of his heart, his love for Lazarus, and the plight of Martha and Mary Jesus enters into the blackness of their grief. Jesus weeps. This profound detail reveals the completeness of Jesus' sharing in our humanity. Here is God who is one with our pain, in our experience of loss in the face not only of physical death of a loved one, but the other types of death we can encounter: loss of relationship, loss of employment, loss of health, loss of independence to name a few examples.

If we zoom out of this intensely intimate moment between Jesus, Martha and Mary and go to our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, death is still the central focus.

The scene prior to our first reading is the vision of Ezekiel gazing out on a desert plain littered with the skeletal remains of an “army” of dried bones. Unlike Lazarus who is still pungent, these guys and gals are real dead. In response to God’s question to him if he believes these dead can live, Ezekiel replies with faith: **Oh Lord God, you know** (Ez.37:3). God in turn responds with the words of today’s first reading, **I will open your graves and have you rise from them...I will put my spirit in you that you may live** (Ez.37:13).

John and Ezekiel offer us a message of hope in the face of the blackness, despair, grief and hopelessness we all encounter at various times in life: physical, emotional and spiritual. God’s message is especially timely as we encounter the blackness and grim statistics of the Coronavirus decimating the whole world, our nation, and our state. The message is this: **GOD IS LIFE**. Jesus calls to Lazarus: **Come forth!** At the word of God, uttered by the God-become-human Word, the blackness and stillness of the grave are pierced and Lazarus walks out of the tomb. At the word of God uttered in the Spirit by Ezekiel dry bones are clothed in flesh, breath infused into them, and they live again. This is utterly foreign to our creaturely existence bound by space and time. God makes no bones about it. Even though we die, we will live. After a couple of minutes of experiencing total blackness the bus driver turned on the lights and we drove out of the blackness of the mine into the brilliance of the noonday sun. Out of the blackness and fear of these days, the blackness of sin, Jesus The Resurrection and the Life—the one who has gone before us—will open our graves, call us out of their suffocating blackness, and be there to greet us on the other side.

The question for us is the same Jesus posed to Martha: **Do you believe this?** (Jn. 11:26)

29 March 2020
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