

5th Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2020

WEEKLY DEVOTION:

Psalm 77. This is an excellent example of how the Scriptures would have us address God in times of duress such as these. We shouldn't be shy about asking for what we want, even if it doesn't seem "spiritual" or just seems selfish. We should remember the miracles God has done in the past and is fully capable of doing in the future. We should look at the times in the Bible that God has saved His people from calamity. That will keep us in God's Word, and keep our perspective in line with His. God doesn't despise His people for their needs. He wants you to bring your needs to Him. Do so.

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

EPISTLE: Romans 8:1-11

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he

condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

HOLY GOSPEL: John 11:1-45

¹¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

"Get Back Up"

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Dear friends,

The readings for today all cover a single theme, and that is resurrection. There's a synchronicity here, between Old Testament and New, between Epistle and both those. Each one has an example of the power of God to bring life. Each one shows us, clearly, what God does with death and how God deals with His people.

In the Old Testament lesson, Ezekiel is shown a valley full of dry bones. This is a pretty well-known story from Ezekiel, this guy doesn't get too much press, but the dry bones thing is probably what he's best known for. Our best guess, based on the language and previous occurrences, is that our OT lesson is a vision, God didn't actually take Ezekiel to a real place on earth where there was bunches of dry bones, this

was a dream or out-of-body experience. God is intending to demonstrate something with this vision. There's some salient details here, for example, the bones are dry. That means they have been there a long time. These people are not freshly dead, they're really really dead. So dead that none of their flesh, their moisture, remains on their bodies. God asks Ezekiel a question:

“Son of Man, can these bones live?’ And I answered ‘O Lord God, you know.’” Basically, Ezekiel is saying, God, you know everything, why are you asking me? So God gives orders. **“Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you will know that I am the Lord.’”** Coupla things here to remember. Number 1, this is another example of the word 'prophecy' being used in a different way than we're used to. Ezekiel wasn't telling the future to these bones, he was speaking to these bones on behalf of God. That's what prophecy means, a man speaking for God. What Ezekiel is actually doing is preaching to these bones, he's giving them a little mini-sermon. Number 2, look what happens. Ezekiel speaks God's own word to these bones, and then...

“So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.” Again guys, God's Word does exactly what it says it will do. Ezekiel spoke that word to these bones, and just as God said, it happened. All throughout the Scriptures you see this. When God speaks, things happen. Also, there was no breath in the bodies, there is no life in them. If God doesn't give life, there ain't no life. All life comes from God and only from God. You can put together all the bits and pieces, assemble everything that makes a human being, but life is a miracle that must come from God. We are not giant biological machines or computers, there is something to life that science, with all its fluster and flair and

pizzazz, can't explain. That something is often described in the Bible as breath. It is worth noting that the Hebrew word used as "breath," is the same word that is used for "spirit." That is not an accident.

Ezekiel goes on to preach to that breath, that Spirit, and the bones come alive. Why is all this happening? God tells Ezekiel in verse 11: **"Son of Man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit-"** my *breath*. Same word. **"within you, and you shall live, and I will place you within your own land. I have spoken, and I will do it."**

That's why. In Ezekiel's time the nation of Israel was in exile. They'd lost their land, their heritage, most of them had probably lost a good chunk of their loved ones during the Babylonian conquest, and now they've lost their nation and their freedom. The Israelites have lost their hope, they think they are dead, more than that, they think they are so dead that their bones are dried up. They say to one another, we are indeed cut off. Cut off from what? Cut off from God. Cut off from His family, His favor. They thought God had discarded them, because that's what they deserved.

So God sends Ezekiel with this vision to preach to these people. Just like what happened in this vision, that's going to happen to Israel. Their graves will be cracked open, and they will be raised. God repeats that over and over, He hammers it home to His people to reassure them that they aren't cut off, they're still God's people. The Israelites have lost everything, but God hasn't abandoned them. Israel earned everything that happened to them in the exile. They earned the sieges, the dead friends and family, the starvation, the slavery, the deportation. They earned all of that. But God still didn't let them go, He

didn't abandon them completely. He stayed with them even as He brought the hammer down on them for their sins.

This is an awesome picture of Old Testament resurrection, a nation, brought back from death and exile, despite their horrible sin and their stubborn hearts. Now, jump over to the Gospel lesson. Jesus brings a dead man back, a man who'd been in the grave four days. **"I am the resurrection and the life,"** He says. **"Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."** He fulfills the ultimate example of what Ezekiel was shown in Himself, Jesus does. God's going to bring His dead people back, that's what Ezekiel was shown, and Jesus does it. Right there. In the face of two women and unnumbered Jews. What Ezekiel saw, Jesus did in His own being. What God promised Israel, Jesus is delivering. He's bringing it, and showing it in this miracle. Death, your days are numbered.

So we have these two pictures, complimentary pictures of God taking on our problem, our consequence, death, and undoing it. Breaking its power. Releasing that hold it has over our entire species, over all of us. He doesn't get rid of it, but it has no power. Death, for the Christian, who was given faith in Jesus, has no power, has nothing on us. Wonderful. We don't have to mourn like those who have no hope. But!

Look at the Epistle. **"To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."** That is where you are. Naturally, y'all are in the flesh, hostile to God, cannot submit to God's Law, cannot please God. You were born that way, I was, all of us were. Flesh = sin. That flesh is what dies, that flesh, that sin, is what we bury when we bury our dead. That's you. But Paul seems to contradict himself here, but all he's doing is reflecting how schizophrenic and screwed up humanity is. **"You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact**

the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Does the Spirit of God dwell in you? You darn right it does. You got that same Spirit when you were baptized. That same Spirit gives Jesus to you when the Word is preached to you, when the Supper is given to you. So you're in the Spirit. You're something else. You were a sinner, just like Israel. You still are a sinner. You deserve death, hell, and all the pain this life can throw at you. But, that's not what you get. Christ gets the death, Christ suffers the hell, the pain? Christ suffered it with you.

All these pictures of resurrection, new life, dry bones in Ezekiel, Lazarus in the New Testament, all of that was brought to you, given to you, delivered to you by the same Jesus that made all of it possible for you. The same Jesus that brings you into the Spirit. Why do you need to hear this? Because of that flesh that Paul talks about. You are Christians. You are of the Spirit, pleasing to God, perfect. But that life that God created in you at your Baptism, that life that is sustained by the Lord's Supper, that life is lived in the flesh, the same flesh that is hostile to God. It makes the head spin. I love God because God loved me! Ah, now I hate God because God's making me go through all this stupid stuff that hurts me! Back and forth. That's your life as Christians. The Bible says you are sheep to be slaughtered, worthless servants doing your duty. The Bible says you are dead, as dead as Lazarus, as dead as those dry bones in the desert.

But if there's anything to learn about God this Sunday, is that He is the God that makes life out of death. He is the God that fixes what's broken, straightens what's crooked, cleans what's dirty, purifies what is impure. You and me were all of those things and worse, children of the devil himself. God brought us back. Just like He brought back Israel in Ezekiel's day. Just like He raised Lazarus when He walked this Earth, God brought us back. He made us something else, Spirit, perfect, clean of sin, righteous and pure in His sight. That's ours right now, right now. He offers it in His own body, His own blood, He speaks it in His own Word. Flesh? Sin? Their days are numbered. Our days, as God's children, redeemed by Him, justified by Him? We are eternal, because He is eternal.

Amen.