

Lent Week 5

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

What does a faithful response to tragedy look like? Mary and Martha in our text give almost the same response: Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And we see that a lot as people try to describe faith. “If we are faithful, we won’t feel sad.” Or the tragedy won’t strike. As though faith is some sort of protective ward we can use against pain. People get tripped up about why did Jesus wait after hearing of Lazarus’ illness. Assuming that Mary and Martha are right, that if Jesus had come right away, everything would have been fine.

Last week we looked at the story of the man born blind and the ways that we try to pull a reason out of it. We want to know *why*. And we do the same thing with Lazarus’ story. We look for the *why* of it. But I’m not sure that we are supposed to hear Jesus’ words that way. I’m not sure that we are supposed to hear Jesus’ words as offering the rationale and explanation behind why Lazarus fell ill, or that most importantly, God works good even in the midst of tragedy and death.

But our psalm gives us a different take on pain. This psalm we read together, Psalm 130, comes from a part of the psalter that has the so called “psalms of ascent.” Psalms that would be sung by pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem. And many of these are joyous psalms, psalms of trusting in God, psalms sharing what God has already done. But then we have 130 in there. A psalm of lament and confession. “Out of the depths I cry to you,” an interesting image to be singing as one is walking up the mountain to Jerusalem, for sure. But I think it juxtaposes the two different emotions. The upwards physical movement to the temple, and the sinking emotional feeling as guilt and pain and sadness weigh down up on the singer. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchers who keep watch in the night wait for the light of the morning. It’s a psalm of trust in its own way, a way that moves through the very deepest pit of the pain.

In our John text, Jesus arrives when Lazarus is “stinking dead.” He has been dead for four days, and there is a stench. Because it isn’t always easy to tell when someone has died, especially without modern understandings of medicine and without our tools for monitoring, there were practices to help if someone had accidentally been buried alive. But one sign was clear: If someone has been dead for four days, they are dead. And that’s when Jesus arrives.

Jesus arrives on the day when hope is officially lost. When it is clear that the tragedy has happened. In that deepest pit of pain. He does not arrive to prevent the tragedy, but to transform it. To bring new life out of it. In the gospel of John, this scene is the turning point. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is Jesus anger in the temple that prompts the plot to kill him. In John’s gospel though? In John’s gospel it is the raising of Lazarus. Because they didn’t understand who he was? No, I think they understood well, perhaps better than we do

sometimes; it is this scene that made the leaders realize how much of a threat Jesus was to their power and ways of thinking.

We are preparing next week for a rollercoaster of a week. Next Sunday, we will read the story of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem and by Friday we will be reading of his death. We will be immersed in stories of challenge and pain before we get to the joy of Easter morning. Our tradition does not skip death and go straight to the resurrection, but we are going to linger and take our time with these coming stories.

But we'll be lingering differently this year. We'll be lingering physically apart from one another. This is the first weekend I will be leading worship out of my house. We have a different sort of communal grief this year as we move forward, as we are scattered. What is our faithful response to the tragedies of our own day? To our own scattering? To the ways we are seeing loss around us? Our scriptures give us full permission to share the pain and frustration and fear with God. "Out of the depths we cry," as we struggle to find our footing in this time and as many of us grieve physical community at the approach of Holy Week.

Jesus doesn't rebuke Mary or Martha or any of the mourners for their grief. And he joins them. He does not tell them that they should not feel sorrow or that if they really trusted, they would not be in pain. But he is moved to tears in their midst.

And *then* he calls out to Lazarus. He calls out to Lazarus by name and Lazarus comes out of the tomb. The Word of God creates life where before there was only death. The tragedy is transformed.

Because that's what the Word of God does. Our Ezekiel text doesn't have a story of a resurrection, but a vision. A vision that reminds me of Genesis 2. In Genesis 2, God has formed the human being, but it is only a sculpture until God breathes life into it. God breathes the *ruach* of life, *ruach* being the word for spirit, wind, and breath in Hebrew. And now, the prophet Ezekiel sees a vision from God. Outside his vision, he is a prophet to a people who have been scattered in exile. A people who have been taken from their homes, who have been separated from their families and forced to assimilate to a new place and culture. A people wondering if there is any life in their future. A whole people in the deepest pits of pain. Inside his vision, Ezekiel is in front of a valley of dry bones. Scattered bones, bones strewn about by chaotic forces. And God asks him, "Can these bones live?" And as we continue in Ezekiel's vision, God commands Ezekiel to proclaim life in the midst of this valley. To proclaim the word of the Lord, and the bones come together and flesh comes upon them... But it is only after God sends the *ruach* to the valley that there is a living, breathing multitude. The *ruach* swirls around from the four corners filling the bodies, and God explains to Ezekiel that this is the whole people. This is God's promise to bring life to this whole people who have been scattered.

So how do we faithfully respond in this time? With honest prayer, lament, and trust. With love for God and neighbor, and hearing the promise from the God who loves us: God creates life in the midst of pain and death. In the midst of pain and grief and exile and quarantine and death, God is speaking life. Yes, resurrection at the end, and yes, life for God's people when all hope seemed lost.