

“LIFE AND DEATH”

a sermon on Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

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In case you haven't noticed after these months together, a great deal of what I have to say about the Christian faith – as I understand it in the Scriptures – is more *communal* than *individual*. It's about the “covenant community,” the *Church*: what it is, why it exists, and certainly what it means to be faithful participants in it.

To a considerable extent, I would argue that a covenantal, communal understanding of the Christian faith is one of the significant hallmarks and *distinctive* qualities of our particular faith tradition. And I am certainly not alone in that. All you have to do is listen to a ministerial examination on the floor of this – or I would venture to say any other – presbytery of our church and you will hear questions crafted to bear out the candidate's views on that matter – *especially* when it comes to questions on the Sacraments and Reformed worship, but on other theological subjects as well.

And if their answers are too focused on “individual faith experience” as the single goal of the Sacraments, or the service of worship, or the Church's existence in the world, the body's displeasure becomes obvious.

But all of that said, *participation* in the covenant community is predicated on what we Presbyterians ourselves describe as “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” And if ever there is a time when that “relationship” ought to be on our minds . . . and a topic of consideration in sermons . . . it is right now – deep as we are in the season of Lent, about to once again encounter the events of Holy Week.

The Scripture readings for this week are anything but subtle. There *are* Scriptures that make subtle points, that leave a great deal of room for interpretation, or that focus on a myriad of aspects of the Christian journey.

Today's readings aren't among those. We're down to brass tacks here, so to speak. At the end of the day, this is about life and death.

For Ezekiel's part, to be fair, the issue was *Israel's* life and death. What can I say? Ezekiel was a temple priest, completely displaced by the temple's destruction and the people's exile.

But his poignant and graphic description of God’s Spirit breathing new life into old, dead, dry bones is also a very personal, even *intimate* scene, demonstrating just how integral our relationship to God’s Spirit really is. The Spirit, is *literally*, for Ezekiel, the air we breathe, and our very “life.”

Indeed, in both Hebrew and Greek, the words for “Spirit” (*ruach* in Hebrew, and πνεῦμα *pneuma* in Greek), can be translated *not only* “spirit,” but also “wind” and “breath.” That’s how Biblical thought of the spirit. To *have* it is to be a living, *breathing* creature. Without it, we have no life. It’s that simple.

And so God’s Spirit, Ezekiel proclaims, is able to take even the most completely dead, dry bones, and breathe new life into them, turn them once again into living creatures.

Paul’s message about God’s Spirit in us is not so different. But whereas Ezekiel was writing about Israel, and God’s ability to “resurrect” the nation after its time of judgment, Paul’s message is *completely* personal. And he is also talking about something *deeper*. Not just “physical” life. Paul writes, “if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

Both of those texts are helpful to Presbyterians who find the language of “relationship with Jesus Christ” challenging, because they both make it clear that the “relationship” is a thoroughly *organic* one. If we are *truly* alive; that is, not just “physically” alive, but alive in any “spiritual” sense at all, then the Source of that life (says Paul), as well as the Source of our physical life itself (says Ezekiel), is our relationship with its Author, which is God’s Spirit.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is John’s account of Jesus’ relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. I say “John’s account” because Luke also tells us a story about Mary and Martha – the one about Martha being “distracted,” while Mary was willing to set her chores aside and sit at Jesus’ feet. But the story of their brother Lazarus is told only in John.

The story itself is simple enough. Lazarus falls ill. Eventually, he dies – the spirit leaves him, in other words. All people die. And in Biblical days before miracle drugs, complex operations, and the many other wonders of modern medicine and medical care that we Americans take for granted, people *often* died when they were young and should have had a great deal of life still in front of them. So Lazarus’ death is untimely and unexpected. But it happens.

When Lazarus first fell ill, Mary and Martha sent for Jesus. He was, after all, a known “healer” by that time in his ministry, and although we aren’t given any other details about their relationship, Jesus clearly knew and was fond of Lazarus, so they hoped that he would come with haste.

But alas, Jesus didn’t actually *arrive* until Lazarus had been dead for some time – dead, and buried, as was their custom, in a burial cave. The delay, we are told, was partly Jesus’ own doing, specifically, John says, because he *knew* what he was going to do, and he didn’t want to leave *any* room for misinterpretation, here. As in last week’s story of the healing of *not just* a “blind man,” but a man *blind from his birth*, Jesus wanted to ensure that, as in the words from the Wizard of Oz that strangely find their way into my head whenever I read this story, Lazarus “is not *merely* dead, [but] really, really, *really* dead!”

And so Jesus clearly sees in the news he receives from Mary and Martha not the illness and impending death of a friend, but yet another opportunity to perform a visual demonstration of God’s awesome power.

The Lazarus story, like Paul’s words about the Spirit, is intensely *personal*. It is about Lazarus, to be sure. Lazarus was dead. *Four days in the tomb* dead. He was *really* dead. And Jesus’ demonstration of God’s amazing power was a demonstration, really, of God’s *presence*. The point is, our very *existence* is dependent on that presence. Without it, we are nothing but dead, dry bones. *With* it, we are *alive*. We are *life*.

Now, in light of the story of Jesus with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, even *before* the part about Lazarus dying and being “raised from the dead” by Jesus, if we are considering the question of our “relationship” with Jesus, it seems to me that our most obvious first response would be, why *wouldn’t* we want to be in relationship with this man? Why *wouldn’t* we want to be “friends” with a person who treated people the way he treated them, and who taught what he taught, and did what he did?

But then the reality sets in. To be this man’s *friend* means to support him not just on the road *to* Jerusalem, when he is doing all these great things we’ve been reading about, being so “inclusive,” and demonstrating God’s awesome power. Being his friend *also* means supporting him in the days that are coming – when even his *closest* followers fell short. To be Jesus’ friend means to join *with* him in his suffering and crucifixion. As Paul put it back in the sixth chapter of Romans, “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has

died is freed from sin. But *if* we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

Those are nice words. Good *theological* words. But when it comes to putting them into action, that’s where things get difficult.

The goal is worth it, to be sure. And we will celebrate that great victory soon enough. But today, our focus is the earthly reality that we must all face – that physical life is brief, and passing. And that both our *physical* and our *spiritual* lives are dependent on Christ’s spirit in us.

And Jesus beckons us into relationship with Him because he was able to what we are not – he *used* that “awesome power of God” to take with him to the cross “the sins of the world,” that we might have life.

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Christ, the “earthly reality” of death is not *ultimate* reality. And that Good News comes to us by way of the cross, where Jesus, *our friend*, is headed.

Thanks be to God for Jesus’ *willingness* to go there, for the sake of those who were *unwilling* to come to his aid. And may we have the strength to continue the journey and be there ourselves as “witnesses” to God’s mighty work.

To God be the glory.