

**St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church**

Keller, Texas

Sermon for March 29, 2020 ~ Lent 5A

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Daily death toll reports as the Coronavirus spreads strike fear in us. Staying home all the time isn't as much fun as we might have imagined it would be. I'm reminded of song "Old Man River" from the musical comedy, "Show Boat". The words and music of this song combine to depict the sad plight of the black slave along the banks of the Mississippi River. The depths of despondency and grief are vocalized in the lyrics: "Ah gits weary an' sick of tryin', ah'm tired of livin' an' skeered of dyin'."

They strike a familiar chord in all of us, I suspect, for the fear of death is a major psychological problem for humankind. As Sigmund Freud once observed, "In dealing with death, most of us are living psychologically beyond our means." And, at the same time, the weariness of living presents people with problems. St. Augustine suggested that the fear of dying and the lack of zest for living are related. After the death of a friend, he became despondent and wrote: "Some incomprehensible feeling arose in me: both a loathing of living and a fear of dying weighed heavily within me."

I am reminded of something someone else said, "In this age, the important question seems not to be is there life after death, but, rather, is there life after birth?" There is an answer to both questions. In fact, the main theme running through the Bible is God's concern that we be given every possible chance to enjoy life to its fullest – now, and in the hereafter.

During this Lenten season, we have seen this concern repeatedly in our readings. Enjoyment of the fullness of life takes effort and vigilance. The Hebrew nation fell victim to jealousy and corruption among its political and religious leaders. Rivalries within their own ranks sapped the strength that would have made the people strong to resist their enemies. The United Kingdom became divided. Even when they were united, the Israelites had barely enough strength to protect themselves. Divided, they became easy prey to the great powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. Both Israel and Judah fell victim to the armies of their stronger neighbors. Their national life was crushed. First the northern kingdom fell, then the southern kingdom. Once again, despair, deeper than their ancestors experienced in the wilderness, gripped the Israelites spirit. Some were killed in battle. Others died of exhaustion as they were driven into captivity.

Yet from their ranks, God raised up persons who held an unusual faith that their nation would be restored. They believed that their people would someday return to Jerusalem to re-establish their kingdom. One of these people was Ezekiel. Today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures finds Ezekiel walking among the skeletal remains of his courageous countrymen in a valley that must have been the scene of the last massive battle between the Jews and the Babylonians. He could not believe that this was God's last word concerning his chosen, covenant people. So, in that forbidding spot, Ezekiel became attentive to God's intentions for his captive people. In that moment of reflection, Ezekiel received a message from God: "Son of man, can these bones live?" He humbly answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Ezekiel's faith was a groping, timid faith. He wanted to say yes, but the daily realities he faced forced him to leave the answer to God. The divine response must have cheered the prophet: "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 clean cut off' ... I will bring you home into the land of Israel... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land."

So, here, we get a picture of God desiring a fullness of life for his people. God is on the side of health and life. Ezekiel carried to his exiled people the message that God was for them, not against them. Captivity was not his will for them. Freedom to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it and to enjoy fullness of life was God's desire for them. His vision of a vital life restored to dry bones affirms that the creator has great hopes for humanity. God desires fullness of life for us, not as some grand finale in the world to come, but during our lifetime.

So, if we are to face death unafraid, we have to learn to face life, today, first. Much depends on what we do about life. No matter how optimistic God's hopes are. Human beings can and do disregard the sacredness of their lives. Many people seek enjoyments in ways that cheapen the value of human life. Too much attention to getting our kicks, cultivating prejudices, living without discipline and conviction and all the rest are pathetic illustrations of what St. Paul had in mind when he observed, "To set the mind of the flesh is death." Such pursuits elevate self to a place that Christ alone should occupy. "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God: it does not submit to God's law, indeed, it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." What Paul is saying is that life is a gift to be received from God and lived to the fullest, according to the way God designed life to be lived. To seek to procure life from our surroundings or manufacture it artificially is a form of idolatry and will surely bring us to death. We become captives of our own unexamined, limited way of living.

Our moment of truth arrives when we confess the need for God to remake us. God waits for this moment. Then God can pour new life and meaning into our wasted lives. The redemptive work of Jesus Christ is liberating. He calls people to a new way of life that makes it possible for us to experience true freedom, liberated from whatever enslaves us, whatever binds us, whatever commands a loyalty from us that draws us from God and our neighbors. The work of the saints is to carry on the liberating work of the Incarnate One wherever we may be.

That point was driven home to me in a powerful way the first time I visited the ancient village of Bethany and the site that has long been revered as the Tomb of Lazarus. At the entrance to the tomb, we read the same gospel passage that was read to us today. Then, we went down into the tomb. The passageway was so narrow and the steps were so steep that we had to go in one at a time. The thought occurred to me that was a bit macabre to travel halfway around the world to go down into a grave. However, as I stood there in that confining space and imagined being sealed into it, I began to desire the light of day, the air, my companions on the journey, and the freedom outside that prison. I began the climb to the surface and imagined I was in a birth canal. When I emerged, I saw my traveling companions standing there waiting for me. As I looked at them, I heard the words of Jesus, that were spoken to that crowd standing there and gawking on that day when Lazarus came forth. Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go." Set him free. Liberate him. Do not stand in the way of the life of liberty I have given him.

That's what the Church in every age is called to do. You and I are called to offer the liberating, life-giving Gospel of Christ to everyone who walks through these doors, strangers as well as people who have been our pew mates for decades. That's what healthy congregations do. We have been working on being the healthiest congregation we can be.

If you are tired of living and scared of dying, you are invited to turn what's left of your life over to God today and let him show you, in a way you'll never forget, that he is at work giving life to that which everyone else has given up for dead? When we face life with God, we will forget to face death with fear.