

Ready for Lent: Ready for the Spirit

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael - March 29, 2020

5th Sunday in Lent

Readings Today: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Music Today: Beneath the Cross of Jesus & Amazing Grace

Greeting: May the Lord be with you on this day! I pray that as we join together in worship, in whatever way we join together that we be united by one Spirit, serving one Father, in the truth of the Son. May the Lord be with us on this day! Amen.

Music: Beneath the Cross of Jesus

1. Beneath the cross of Jesus

I fain would take my stand,

the shadow of a mighty Rock

within a weary land;

a home within the wilderness,

a rest upon the way,

from the burning of the noontide heat

and the burden of the day.

2. Upon the cross of Jesus

mine eye at times can see

the very dying form of One

who suffered there for me:

and from my stricken heart with tears

two wonders I confess,

the wonders of redeeming love

and my unworthiness.

3. I take, O cross, thy shadow

for my abiding place:

I ask no other sunshine than

the sunshine of his face;

content to let the world go by,

to know no gain nor loss;

my sinful self my only shame,

my glory all the cross.

Announcements: We will not be having services until after Easter, so there will be a few more Sundays that are online only. For more information, see this week's update from me. Of course, it is all available online if you check the church Facebook page or if you check my website, St.Michael Dot PW. I just got an update from the bishop and Easter services will be online this year. If you are interested in recording or sharing anything special for that, please let me know. In person services are suspended until further notice.

For Reflection: Psalm 130

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!*

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.*

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

*O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities. (NRSV*)*

The 130th Psalm gives us a picture of turning to God in times of trouble. That out of the depths we cry out to God, knowing that God is there. Knowing that God forgives. Knowing that God rescues. But it also paints a picture of patience. We must wait for the Lord. So as we wait, for the bright dawn that God brings, we must be patient and we must be in prayer. How do you show love for God? Love for your neighbor? How do we show love in this time of distancing? Do we trust that God will bring us a hopeful dawn? I pray we may reflect upon these words and let them be our prayer and our petition.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for being with us in these unusual times. We pray that you will pour out a spirit of calm for us all. Help us, that as we put distance between each other physically, that we do not create distance in our hearts. Let us not forget that we still share a common bond in your love and grace. May we find new ways to share your peace and your love with each other. Help us to do all we can to help each other as we do all we can to stay safe. Through it all, strengthen us that we may trust in you in all that we are and all that we do. Bring us to the bright morning in the light of your glory. Lord, hear our prayer! In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Sermon:

Oh Lord, help us to be ready for you, ready to remember your mercy, ready to remember your love. Guide us by your Holy Spirit and grant us wisdom and understanding. That as the scriptures are read, and your Word proclaimed, may we be ready to listen, during this season of Lent. And let God's people say: Amen.

Our readings today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Our first reading is from Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 1 through 14.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land

of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.” (NRSV)*

Our second reading is from Romans, chapter 8, verses 6 through 11.

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason 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.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But 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. (NRSV)*

Our final reading for today is from the Gospel according to John, chapter 11, verses 1 through

45.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. (NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This has been another unusual week. I kept trying to write this message. I really did. And life kept happening and getting in the way. At least, that's what I thought. Frustrated at all of the things keeping me from this task, I prayed for guidance. Surely God would let me know what I was supposed to do! I had become a delivery person and an algebra teacher! I was trying to run a kindergarten class for one while trying to help a preschooler adjust to his days being invaded. I was adjusting my schedule for phone call appointments and figuring out new ways to do things I was very used to. All of those changes take time and energy. I felt like my bones were dried up. I was spent. Then I realized something. I hadn't changed my expectations. I hadn't allowed the spirit to move me to where I needed to be. I was still expecting to have all the same results while doing brand new things. I was like everyone thinking they knew what Jesus was talking about when he was trying to tell them that something new was about to happen. I was caught up in being used to everything that I didn't know how to handle the unexpected. I was being led by the flesh, that is, I was being led by my human nature. Instead, I needed to have a little faith that the spirit would see me to a place of peace where I could have new expectations for a new thing.

I began to think about how we are all experiencing something new right now. And I don't think that we are at the end of things being different. For some, this has changed the entire dynamic of how school is done. It has changed the way we work. The way we interact. Social distancing in response to the current virus situation is impacting us in ways that we never imagined. Nearly every aspect of life is having to adjust. So I started looking at the ways that our scripture lessons today teach us about a spirit of understanding so that we can process new things. We see it front and center with both Ezekiel and in John.

Ezekiel sounds like one of my kids at first. Because if I ask them a question that they know I already know the answer to, they just look at me and go "well, you know Dad, so why don't you tell me?" I cannot fault him one bit. I mean, Ezekiel is already whisked away by the spirit into a valley full of bones. At this point, he knows that whatever he thought was impossible is not impossible for God. So when God tells him to prophesy that the bones will live, he does what he's told. The bones become bodies and the bodies spring to life. This is not normal. This is not the behavior one would expect from a large collection of bones.

The gospel account also gives us a picture of the unknown. We see almost everyone assuming that Jesus is speaking of things they already know and that he's going to do things they already expect. The disciples barely understand what's going on and decide they'll follow Jesus to go see Lazarus anyways. At first, they think Lazarus is just sleeping and then they think that the trip is going to get Jesus killed. They are thinking only about what they already understand. The same thing happens when Martha goes to meet Jesus. He tells her that Lazarus will rise again. She replies with the "oh, yes, of course, in the last days he'll rise." She replies with what she already understands, not grasping the full meaning of his words. It isn't even clear if Martha understands his words before she goes back to get Mary. Mary tells Jesus that she believes he could have done something. Not that he can do something, but that he could have done something. But now he's too late. She is speaking from what she knows. Things get more confusing for her when Jesus says to roll away the stone. He's

dead. It's going to smell. There's confusion. They still don't expect what is about to happen. And that is the moment I want to pause on. Because there's something to be said for everyone being so lost.

We are in a time of great confusion. It is reaching every aspect of life. I can tell you from personal experience that there really isn't anything that it hasn't reached. There's anxiety about what happens next. I know that I've been navigating how to parent and work in these new conditions. It is hard. One of the hardest things is accepting that this isn't like anything that I've had to face. It is new. It is unknown. I keep having to stop myself because I'll start to think about things and get caught up in how I had been doing things. And I could really feel for Ezekiel. I could feel for Mary. I could feel for Martha. I could feel for the Disciples. Because everything they were used to expecting was out the window. What can we do? Trust God. Trust that the spirit will guide you and lead you. Pray. Because there is a constant in the scriptures today. God was there before, during, and after. God was there telling Ezekiel that though the people might feel abandoned right now, God was going to restore them. Though they felt like a dead nation, God would raise them up again. Though they felt that they were all dried up and had nothing left, the spirit would come upon them and make them whole once again. Though we might feel like we are dried up with nothing more to give and are too far gone, God will restore us.

But you know what else I realized as I was sitting down for the 30th time to write down these words? We are also allowed to be frustrated and to be sad. We are allowed to feel anxious and to be worried. Jesus didn't chide Martha and Mary for grieving. No, Jesus, about to raise Lazarus from the dead, stops to cry. You ever stop to think about that? Jesus has already set out to bring Lazarus back. That is why he is there! But when he sees a good friend having a hard time, he cannot help but be moved. He was disturbed in spirit. So he cries. He cries even though he knows what comes next. He cries because even if things are going to get better, at that moment they are not. Things aren't OK so he cries with his friends. Now let me say something right here. If Jesus can let himself cry over something that he *knows* is about to be much better, aren't we allowed to have sorrow if things are difficult? It is easy to say that things will get better. I know they will get better! I do! But that doesn't change that it is hard right now! Will God give us strength? Of course! What does strength look like? Well, sometimes it looks like someone showing sorrow and acknowledging pain. Because here is something I've come to learn about troubling times. The spirit isn't just about leading us to happy thoughts and pushing out all the negative ones. That is because the spirit of God is not some motivational speaker just trying to get us out of a funk. God leads us through dark valleys, not just around them. God doesn't tell us that dark valleys should be ignored so that we can just think about the light places. No, God shows them to us, reminds us that he is there, and gets us to the other side. But God knows that they are difficult. We are blessed with a Savior who not only acknowledges our pain but understands it. One that doesn't just know our sadness but shares our sadness. One that doesn't just see our grief but has cried human tears over it. A Savior who gave himself over to suffering so that we would know that we are loved. A Savior that died so that we would understand how much we are cared for. Our Heavenly Father hears our cry! He listens to our prayers! He knows our troubles! And we have a Holy Spirit to rest upon us to bring us peace. To bring us the knowledge

that even in the darkest times we are not alone. That no matter how much distance we put between ourselves and others, we are still bound together in hope! Hope. Hope.

Listen. Things are different. Things are strange. Things are not what we expected. Things can be upsetting. Things can be out of our control. Things can be frustrating. Things can be unusual. But things are still in God's hands. God didn't go anywhere. We may not be in this building together, but we are here in spirit. The spirit that keeps us united in our hope. A spirit that keeps us moving forward. A spirit that gives us the strength to face the unknown. A spirit to understand that we may not always guess what that strength will look like. We might be tired. We might be weary. We might feel weak. God is there in it all. To help us. That the spirit may find us and lead us. May we be a people ready to accept that spirit. May we be a people ready to share that spirit. May we be a people ready to serve God and each other. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: Lord, forgive us we pray. We come before you as those who have sinned against you in what we say and do. We come before you as those who have sinned against you in what we do not say and what we do not do. It is in our doings and our failings that we seek your grace and your mercy. We haven't loved you how we should. We haven't loved each other how we should. We are a people who are sorry, who humbly seek your forgiveness. Help us to live with one another in your mercy and your grace. Let us always remember the sacrifice made by our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, that we may understand your deep love for us. May we honor that love by sharing it with one another, loving as you love and caring as you care. Help us to be of one body redeemed by one blood, serving one God. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed in the weekly update. If you are interested in online giving, please contact me. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Music: Amazing Grace

1. Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see.

2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

3. The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be,
as long as life endures.

4. When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we'd first begun.

Dismissal with Blessing: May I leave you today with the blessing of the Father, the peace of the Son, and the unity of the Holy Spirit. May God be with you, until we meet again. **Amen.**

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
John & Angie Veach	Diane Washburn	Bill Calvert	Eric Veach
Cathy Devall	Brock McMorris	Ed & Verna Titus	Hayden Kanizer
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Laura Eubank Allison	Nancy Sowers
Dave Yaw	Aaron Carrell	Cindy Cisney	Patti Corder & Crew
Joyce Sly	Nancy Hoke	John Millsap	Larry Sidwell
Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Ty Bradley	Ronnie & Elaine Carlen
Jerry Jackson	Pat Nebel	Don Stewart	Earlene Shupe
Brenda Hurt	Sharron Button		
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Nora Werner & Family	Wayne & Charlotte Carrell
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Lois Woolever	Mary White	Nick Nichols
Greg Williams	Eloise Buffenmeyer	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte	Lyle Whitley	Tammy Fischer and Children	

Offerings may be mailed to your local treasurer or addressed to:

Rev Camron D St. Michael

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

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