



EMMANUEL EPISCOPAL
CHURCH, GENEVA

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 29, 2020

Sermon

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

Like last week, we are struck by how powerfully today's Scripture passages speak to us on this Fourth Sunday of Lent. For so many people, this is, at best, a time of loneliness and fear, and, at worst, one of utter despair and sorrow. For health care workers, in particular, it is a period of intense pressure, mental and physical exhaustion and even horrifying moral dilemmas.

Ironically, amidst enforced isolation and social distancing – or to use the new euphemism in the US, distant socialization – our readings actually serve to reinforce our sense of community and oneness, by reminding us that we are all equal before God. With close to a billion people on this earth now living in enforced confinement, rarely has the universal condition of our humanity been so apparent. We are, as one American politician accurately, if undiplomatically, put it, all in the same boat.

Today, a sleek new motorway brings you from Jerusalem to Bethany in less than 15 minutes. It really was only a few hours' walk for Jesus, yet he deliberately puts off setting out after receiving Mary and Martha's message that their brother is dying. How much this delay cost Our Lord in sheer emotional terms is clear from the Gospel text.

With the exception of his own torture and Crucifixion – which by this time he knew would not be long in coming – this passage shows Jesus at his most human and most vulnerable of any episode in the New Testament. The weeping of Lazarus' sisters echo the cry of the Psalmist that we just heard sung: "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord". Their implied reproach must have been almost unbearable for Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". We're told that even the miracle of the healing of the blind man, which we heard about in last week's Gospel, is turned against Jesus by the

bystanders: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from death?” How bitter must that have sounded to Jesus’ ears! And the very sight of Lazarus’ tomb, with the stone in front of it, would have been a most unwelcome sign of things to come for himself.

We have all, at one moment or another in our lives, experienced what we perceive as the absence of God, akin to that desert of dried bones in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel. Like the Psalmist, we wait for the Lord to come, to answer our prayer, to make everything right again – and we wait in vain, or so it seems.

That is even more likely to be the case during terrible and trying times such as these. Our streets are deserted; our schools are closed; our stock markets have resoundingly crashed; our places of work are shuttered; indeed, some will never re-open. And if they do, some of us may soon no longer have a job.

It is not only those struck down by the coronavirus who are in mortal danger – that would be bad enough. It is as if everything that brings meaning and joy and fulfillment to our existence – has simply died. We celebrate this morning’s Eucharist in a church that is despairingly empty, precisely during a season when we here at Emmanuel would have been busy preparing for Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and – yes – Easter, the feast of the Resurrection. Like Martha and Mary and Jesus, we stand in front of a tomb, the tomb of our entire way of life, and we cannot help but weep.

A friend of mine tells of going back to the little Midwestern parish where he grew up for a family funeral. He arrived early for his appointment with the rector and went into the empty church, which had not changed since he was a child. He automatically went to the pew where he had always sat with his parents and knelt there a while. He found his initials that he had carved on the top of the pew. But as he knelt there, my friend said, memories of the past rose up all around him, vivid and real. The church seemed to be filled with the sights and sounds of his childhood. There were his Sunday school teachers, the pretty redhead with the big hat, and the one they called “the old crab”, who told him he was going to Hell the time he dropped his palm on Palm Sunday and accidentally stepped on it. There were all the priests he had known: the charming but inept one; the one who preached way too long; the smart, cocky one fresh out of seminary with an eye for the ladies. There was even the acolyte who was really too little to carry the processional Cross. They called him “the pole vaulter”, because by the time the opening procession reached the altar, the Cross was more horizontal than vertical.

“And then”, my friend told me, “I guess I woke up.”

How we long to awaken from the nightmare of the past few weeks and find our sanctuary its usual vibrant self: the choir back in their stalls, our parishioners embracing each other during the Peace, the semicircles around the altar where we share the Body and blood of Christ. Yet even when that day comes – and come it will – we know that things will never quite be the same once this crisis has passed. Something in us will have died: the assurance that life will merely resume its normal, predictable course of events, the certainty of a cloudless future. In the face of such overwhelming change, we are just plain scared – and that’s okay. So were Mary and Martha in front of Lazarus’ tomb. And so was Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest.

Paul tells us in our Epistle that that is by no means the end of the story. Were we to set our minds solely on the flesh, on what we see, what we can touch, what we tangibly possess, our lives would be very poor indeed. It would be reduced to the rampant consumerism, the thirst for constant diversion and the incessant travel that were the hallmarks of our societies until a very short while ago.

“But you are not in the flesh”, writes Paul, “you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Paul says that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us through our baptism. So we have the assurance that nothing, absolutely nothing can destroy that life within us, no matter how terrified we are and no matter how uncertain the future.

Holy Week this year will be like none that we as a community have ever experienced. Let us have no illusions: the path that we will walk with Our Lord to the Cross will inevitably be one of great challenges, even hardships, that we would never freely choose. We will need to call into question tried and true assumptions, make sacrifices and learn some hard lessons. This year, the Easter season may in fact look a lot more like Pentecost, with the Spirit inspiring us and emboldening us to face what comes.

Our God is a God who brings life out of death – not just Lazarus, and not just Jesus. The day will come when we will emerge from the tomb of darkness and fear and despair, and walk as a resurrected people through the doors of Emmanuel. And we will hear Our Lord’s voice in this place: “Unbind my people, and let them go.” AMEN

Rev. Deacon Richard Cole

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