

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Year A

RCL



Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 130

John 11:1-45

The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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, prophecy, 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 prophecy, 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.

Psalm 130 Page 784, BCP

De profundis

- 1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 For there is forgiveness with you;
therefore you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope.
- 5 My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
- 6 O Israel, wait for the LORD,
for with the LORD there is mercy;
- 7 With him there is plenteous redemption,
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

John 11:1-45

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, be-

cause 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.

SERMON

We started our Lenten journey in John with a story about Jesus and a teacher, Nicodemus. Nicodemus had come to Jesus by night, seeking ... something.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

That’s a nice bit of flattery, but does Nicodemus even know what has drawn him to Jesus? Perhaps not. He comes in darkness. John was written at a time of great stress between the synagogues and the new followers of Christ. Perhaps he wasn’t sure it was quite proper to be seen consulting with Jesus, but was still driven to do so by an itch he couldn’t otherwise scratch.

The next Sunday, we heard of a Samaritan woman at a well. This time, Jesus initiated the conversation by asking for a drink, as the cultural strictures of the time would not allow her to approach him. Jesus offered her “living water”, saying:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is

saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. ... Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Nicodemus was unsure. The woman at the well was walled off by her culture. Jesus speaks to each of them of a mystery, something present and available to them, but unseen by them.

Last Sunday, Jesus came upon a man born blind from birth, a person who had lived his whole life not in darkness, for one must have some concept of light to recognize darkness, but in actual innocence of light. He wasn’t living his life conscious of something lost, but in complete ignorance of that which could be, exactly like the woman at the well and Nicodemus.

Jesus said of the man born blind:

“... he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

This Sunday, Jesus has received word that his friend, Lazarus, is sick unto death. Again, Jesus does something unexpected.

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.

After the two days Jesus told His disciples,

“Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

As I prayed over this series of stories and tried to tease out what the Revised Common Lectionary was trying to show us, I kept thinking of the phrase “a thing revealed”. In the first two stories, John tells us of something available and present which those to whom he is speaking cannot perceive. In the third story, Jesus opens the eyes of a man born blind, a person who has never seen the light, and thus is ignorant of his own

darkness. This Sunday, these stories come to a climax when Lazarus is raised from the dead. Raising a man in the tomb for four days is startling enough, but I think John is showing us that the thing revealed, though we live in ignorance of it, has power we can't imagine. I hear the texts remind us that God's creation is more than we can perceive, and that it is important that we understand that we do not live in a meaningless world, but in a world soaked in meaning and mystery. I hear the texts say that we're like the man born blind — we don't have any idea of the darkness in which we live because we have not yet seen light. Darkness isn't a thing unto itself. It is an absence of light and until you have perceived light, you have no conception of darkness. When Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, was present with these seekers, God was exceptionally present. Jesus even told them, "The Kingdom of God is already among you".¹

The problem then, and now, is that we don't perceive God's presence and without the light of God, we default to believ-

¹ Luke 17:21

ing that our world is a meaningless, random place. The cultural forces which forbade the woman at the well from having any conversation with a Jewish man are the same cultural forces which insist in our time that we live in just such a random, meaningless universe: **[PLAY Excerpt from *Bohemian Rhapsody*]²**

**“Because I'm easy come, easy go,
Little high, little low,
Anyway the wind blows doesn't really matter to
me, to me.”³**

If it were really so, it would break my heart. If my experience of God was only meaningless, random self-deception, it would break my heart. If the wonders of God which I see about me every day were nothing but a thin varnish of wishful thinking my mind applied to a random, meaningless world, it would crush me.

Once, there was a little fish with a large ambition. He was curious about the world, and a deep thinker. He read extensively of The Great Ocean, and longed to see if it truly existed. From all the wise fish and the learned books he under-

² *Bohemian Rhapsody* from *Night at the Opera*, (C) 2011 Hollywood Records, Inc.

³ Ibid.

stood that The Great Ocean was very far away and that only the most righteous and courageous fish could hope to find it. And so, gathering his courage, the brave little fish struck out on his own to find the ocean. After many days' swimming, and frightful struggles, he found a larger, older fish and addressed him directly.

“Sir”, he said. “I have read all about The Great Ocean from my home, and have spoken to many wise fish. Some say it is just a myth. Others tell me it is the greatest thing in the world. I have struggled and swum this far and mean to keep on until I find it or die. What can you tell me about the ocean?”

“The OCEAN?”, asked the older fish. “You’re in it! This is the ocean you are swimming in!”

The little fish looked back at the larger fish with scorn. Lifting one fin he said, “This? This is just water. I’m looking for the ocean! You clearly don’t know anything of importance.” And he swam off in a huff.

We swim in the ocean of God's love for us. God is inescapable. There is nowhere He is not.

**Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.⁴**

We, poor fish, blinded by our very certain ideas of who God is and what God is not, cannot see Him. We see an act of compassion, and we say, "Oh! What a nice person to have done that." We don't see the hand of God in the compassionate act. Yet, John is telling us, there was a time when the Kingdom of God walked among us to teach us that we must be spirit-born to see the story unfolding, to open our eyes, to acquaint us with eternity, to shout, "Lazarus! Come out." Many, many little fish swam past Jesus looking for the ocean,

⁴ Psalm 139:7-12

seeing nothing but water.

My life, and I'm sure yours, is filled with people who are so confident of their own abilities and righteousness that they explain away the presence of God, even when it is displayed in front of their very eyes just as did the little fish. Such folk are honestly baffled at the response of people of faith to the miracles played out each day.

Christianity simply does not make sense until you have faced the sort of facts I have been describing. Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk.⁵

Until your eyes are suddenly opened and you hear, actually hear, a voice commanding “Lazarus, come out!” you will not realize that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the

⁵ C. S. Lewis “Mere Christianity”

law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power. Little fish, the ocean is all around you and it matters how you swim in it.

Those who are baffled by our conviction that the world is a meaningful place, the creation and joy of God Himself, are not our enemies. Neither are those who conceive of God differently than we do. Our enemy is the forces of the world which insist that death is the way of the world, that darkness is a thing unto itself, that there is no hope beyond mindless randomness. Those who dwell in darkness and death are the natural prey of these forces.

The culture in which we live will tell you that we live in an “easy come, easy go, little high, little low, anyway the wind blows doesn't really matter to me” sort of world. The culture in which we live will call you superstitious and old fashioned for your belief that the world swims in the ocean of God’s love. Swim anyway, little fish. Don’t just say a prayer. Make your life a prayer.

[PLAY Excerpt from “My Sweet Lord”]⁶

God Himself says to you, “Swim in the joy of My love and know that I am the Lord!”

AMEN

⁶ “My Sweet Lord” (C) 2009 Umlaut Corporation/EMI Records Ltd This label copy information is the subject of copy-right protection. All rights reserved. (C) 2009 EMI Records Ltd

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