

Lent 5 March 22, 2026

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we hear your word of life and love this morning, may we seek your peace in our lives and in our world. This we ask in the name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

This morning as we gather together, we hear two stories of the dead. The first is the Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of bones. Unfortunately, now in the wake of Israel's destruction of Gaza after the attacks by Hamas, the images of shattered buildings, rubble and a vast wasteland now affect my imagination when I hear those words from Ezekiel. And now, even more present, the destruction of sites in Iran by the combined air forces of the United States and Israel, along with the missile and drone bombardments by the Iranians and Hezbollah, there are more images of smoking rubble and shattered homes, buildings and industrial facilities that more than ever overshadow in my mind's eye the picture of this valley of bones. Perhaps even more frightening are the images of those innocents caught in the crossfire; children in Gaza malnourished with their bones literally visible in their frail limbs, the people weeping over the deaths of their parents in Tel Aviv after an Iranian missile strike, a Lebanese mother now homeless with her children and unable to celebrate the holy day of Eid al-Fitr at the end of the fast of Ramadan. These haunting images and more seem to be our modern day equivalent of the valley of bones seen by Ezekiel. And as Ezekiel finds out, this valley is very full of bones and they are very dry: the life, all life has been taken out from them.

We also hear of Jesus confronting death as well: not on the massive scale of a valley full of many dry bones, not on the scale we see in our times as a result of the violence and military actions in the Middle East, but still, Jesus coming to terms with the death of one he loved, his friend Lazarus. In this long story, we see the very human side of Jesus as he is moved to tears, weeping at the death of this friend. While not as overwhelming in the sense of death all around, the sense of grief here is just as deep - loss most of us have experienced one time or another in our lives. One we love, a person special, or even the most special of all to us, is now dead. Overwhelming and impossible to describe the depth of grief and heartbreak, impossible to put in words the pain and continued anguish we feel knowing that our relationship in this life now has ended,

and even as life goes on, still it is changed and only tears take place: Jesus wept.

In facing death, in the stark darkness of this loss, the words of grief spoken by the ancient psalmist now come to us: "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord; Lord hear my voice." We look, indeed faced with this abyss we seek and search, and we cry out, cry out of the depths, looking, searching, seeking. In our lament, we seek something more, we seek a peace which passes all understanding. The psalmist feels this as well: in this lament, the psalmist goes on to say, "I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for God, in God's word is my hope." It is that same hope that Paul seeks in his letter: knowing the frailness of our lives, knowing the deep disquiet and pain in this valley of dry bones, Paul seeks to bring his soul to a new place: to set the eyes of his faith on the Spirit to find life and peace. Paul seeks the Spirit of Christ that renews our souls, that give new life even in the face of death.

And here we gather this morning, during these last days of Lent, during these forty days given to us to both reflect on where it is in our lives that we find life and peace. Given both the wars and rumors of war that surround us, given the continued assaults on peace caused by the massive wealth inequalities of our society, and indeed the death and poverty caused by these inequalities, making health care inaccessible or inadequate for too many, making housing out of reach for many of our neighbors, and keeping in place the deep, historic divisions of our land in terms of race and gender, our search for life and our call to become peacemakers are central to our call as disciples. But there is a truth for us in the stories from Ezekiel and in the raising of Lazarus beyond just a hocus pocus of making those dry bones live or bringing Lazarus out of the stone cold tomb alive. That truth for us is that there is a Spirit that calls us to life, that calls to us even in the most dire circumstances, that calls as a clarion to disciples. I believe that this truth first starts in our faithful resistance to the forces of death and division. It is a spirit of resistance to destruction we see so prevalent, so increasing around us. It is a Spirit that calls to us as disciples to raise our voices, to place our bodies on the line when needed, to stop this wanton violence and destruction both near and far. This is the Spirit Ezekiel prophesies, that breath of God to give life in resisting the forces of death that surround us, knowing that God's Spirit with us can stand up multitudes, a vast multitude to pursue the hope of justice and peace for all.

There's another point about this encounter with Jesus: when Lazarus comes out of the tomb, still wrapped in the burial clothes, Jesus issues a command, "Unbind him and let him go." The dramatic transformation, bringing Lazarus back to life, is accompanied by this liberating command. Lazarus is unbound and freed from the power of death, but so are those who witness the power of the encounter with Jesus as well. And this is true for us too: when we hear this story, when we see the power of Jesus in this encounter with Lazarus, standing up and resisting the forces of death, we are also given the same possibility to be free. "Unbind him," a transformative command for Lazarus and for you and me too, in this encounter with Jesus today.

But today the focus is on Jesus' love: that love of Jesus that brings Lazarus out of the tomb and the loving encounter Jesus brings to each one of us. We began our worship this morning with a prayer asking for God's grace to love what God commands. But how can we be commanded to love? It is the old notion that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make her drink. We love what we love and we cannot be forced to love or to desire. But we can love when we are loved: we can love as a response to love. And that's the point of these encounters with Jesus: Jesus acts, Jesus acts out of the depth of his loving kindness and the encounter with the love in Jesus is transforming. The Samaritan woman is re-engaged with her community, the man born blind now sees and speaks the truth and Lazarus walks out of the tomb unbound.

And for you and me as well, the loving encounter with Jesus is transformative: the encounter Jesus brings to us is to change our lives, to unbind us from the burdens we carry and to lift us out of the depths where we might be found. It is like the old hymn, "O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus, because he first loved me." This loving encounter with the power of Jesus' love elicits a response of love from us. But even more transformative, this love of Jesus helps us to reach out in love, helps us to go out into the world on Monday, on Tuesday, on Wednesday, to go out and to share this love, to open our hearts, to stretch out open hands for others. And just as we prayed at the beginning of our service, those open hearts are the place where our joys are found, true joys that lift us up and unbind us in our lives. In these closing days of Lent, in these few remaining days in our preparation for Holy Week, may God continue to give us the grace to love as we have been loved, the grace to

share with others what we are given: a love that crosses boundaries of social divisions, a love to transform the conditions of blindness and falsehood, a love that brings life even in the midst of death itself. As Jesus shows us, this is the true meaning of love: that love reaches out to others to bring joy and life. This great and amazing grace is our hope in the depths of our plaintive cry, the hope for our lives and the world. Thanks be to God for this grace we are given in Jesus Christ, our savior. Amen.