

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

Psalm 130

During the last couple of weeks, circumstances have gradually corralled us with ever increasing limitations on our ability to congregate. First, we were given information about this new virus. Then we were advised to refrain from hugging or handshaking and then to wash our hands most thoroughly and frequently. Then we were asked to step back from public transportation and places where strangers tended to congregate in large numbers: movie theaters, restaurants, shopping malls, political rallies and even worship services themselves. Many of us were told to work from home if at all possible. As this virus swept through populated areas at an alarming rate, we were encouraged to stay in our homes...all the time...with the exception of going to the pharmacy, the grocery store, the gas station or a medical facility. At an alarmingly swift pace, we felt our worlds shrinking and our access to each other severely limited. All sorts of virtual reality began to pop up from online chats, to ZOOM meetings, Facebook Live, Virtual Church, ZOOM choirs, and Facetime, Instagram and Twitter. These technologies have been around for a while, but all of a sudden they became lifelines not only for the need to get business done, but to satisfy the very human need each of us has to be connected to one another. It began to dawn on us as we were cut off from physical face-to-face contact with each other how vital and crucial such contact is to our sense of well-being. As the old saying goes, "You never miss the water 'til the well runs dry." Most of us have figured out our optimum amount of social interaction and we barely give it a thought until we can't have it at all. Suddenly, there's a genuine and deep longing for what we had taken for granted as the warp and woof of our lives that has been stripped from us. We are bare. In a very real and palpable way. We are alone...or so we tend to feel. Being able to identify those people, things, and experiences that we are longing for tells us what is most important to us. That's a good thing to know as we tend to think these parts of our life are so dependable that we don't need to stop to think about them or to value them or to treasure them or to truly relish

in them. These things that we are so longing for now are the things that make us feel alive...that nourish us...that keep us going. Without them, we are in mourning. We are lifeless. We are at a standstill. It feels as if a death has taken place. Those of us accustomed to sharing Holy Eucharist on a Sunday morning are suddenly finding ourselves missing that very much. It is the bread of life...the body and blood of Jesus Christ...that nourishes us week in and week out. We need to remember the words that Jesus himself spoke to Satan during his days of temptation in the wilderness: "It is written, One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." So while we may be sorely tempted now to nourish ourselves with the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, we know that under these circumstances, such a thing is dangerous...to ourselves and to others. And God Himself has provided an alternative which is why our Service this morning is the Liturgy of the Word as we remind ourselves that we are also given life-saving nourishment in God's Word in Holy Scripture. God knows our souls are hungry and God continues to feed us in Holy Scripture.

As we arrive at this fifth Sunday of Lent, our scripture passages take us directly to experiences of life and of death that are very much on our minds these days. These passages speak to our deepest longings and our deepest fears. And we are taught about God's antidote to death...to lifelessness...to despair...the love of Jesus Christ and the love of God. This Lenten journey has taken us through the valley of the shadow of death in Psalm 23 just last Sunday. And we were reminded that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. This journey has taken us to the Samaritan woman at the well who was catapulted into life by the living water that Jesus offered her. It has taken us into the wilderness with Moses and the people of Israel who longed for water and were satisfied by God at the rock of Horeb. This journey has reminded us that the promise from God to Abraham did not come to Abraham and his descendants through their obedience to the law, but through the righteousness of their faith...the righteousness of believing in God and God's promises and the belief that God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that did not exist. And our Lenten journey began with Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness and

Jesus' triumph over all that tends to trip us up...the need for food, the desire for power, and the temptation to test God.

And today our scripture passages tell us something about the power of the spoken word. They take us to a conversation between the prophet Ezekiel and God and the desecration of the Valley of the Dry Bones that was the nation of Israel itself. All appeared to be lost. The nation of Israel lay in shambles. All dead. And then there was a conversation...an exchange of words...between Ezekiel and God. Words were exchanged. God asked Ezekiel if these bones could once again come to life and Ezekiel confessed that he didn't know. Only God knows. So God gave Ezekiel the words to speak. And in faith, Ezekiel spoke the words that God gave to him...not knowing what to expect. There was power in those words. Power that God put into those words. Even though Ezekiel may have doubted. Even if he didn't know what would happen, he spoke the words that God gave to him. And God brought the nation of Israel back to life. The God who spoke the world into existence, brought life back into the nation of Israel.

And now our scripture passage has brought us to the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus is in a position to speak a word into God's ear and to make the plea for Lazarus' life. He thanks God for hearing him. He thanks God for listening to him. And once again Jesus creates the ability for others to believe by causing death...one more time...to turn to life. And the circumstances of Lazarus' rising were beyond any question. This was not a sick little girl on her bed who had been believed to be dead before Jesus spoke the words to her, "Arise, Talitha." This is not the sick son of a Centurian who was cured from a great distance by Jesus who never even saw the little boy in person, but merely spoke the word and he was healed. This is a situation in which there is no question at all that Lazarus was positively dead. The Jewish belief is that the soul leaves the body after three days. Lazarus had not only been dead longer than three days, he had been wrapped and bound and placed in the tomb for four days. There was no room for doubt and no room for speculation...no wiggle room of any kind...in what actually happened. Jesus spoke the word to God and then Jesus spoke the word to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus walked out of the

tomb. Just like that. No one watching was expecting that to happen. This didn't happen because devout believers had been on their knees for days in tireless prayer. Lazarus was raised from the dead because of the oneness between Jesus and the Father...and because Jesus spoke the word that made it so. Lazarus was given new life by the one who spoke a word to God and made it happen. And at the same time Jesus sealed his own fate. The raising of Lazarus from the dead was the final nail in Jesus' own coffin as those in positions of power were looking for a way to charge him and execute him. And we have every reason to believe that Jesus knew that. It still did not stop him from speaking the word of life for Lazarus.

No sooner had Lazarus been restored to life than the plot to destroy Jesus was put into full motion. Many of those who saw Lazarus walk out of the tomb quickly reported to Caiaphas the Chief Priest and told him all they had seen and all that had been done by Jesus himself. The Roman troops had already beefed up their numbers for fear of riots by the Jews as Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims arriving to celebrate the Passover and stir up political tensions around their oppression by the Romans. It was the job of Caiaphas and the Temple hierarchy to be sure that Jews did not cause any trouble during Passover thus bringing the wrath of the Romans down on everyone.

The highly agitated Jews who saw the raising of Lazarus couldn't wait to put a word in Caiaphas' ear and tip him off to the possibility of thousands of Jews now flocking to Jesus because he had restored Lazarus' life. These same adoring Jews would shout praises to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey and they would declare him King of the Jews and wave palm branches in his honor. Jesus' last act of love in restoring Lazarus to life and health would give his enemies just the ammunition they needed to arrange for his execution. The Chief Priest Caiaphas spoke some ironic words when he said, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." In other words, let's offer up Jesus to the Romans as a trouble maker inciting people to riot rather than have the full wrath of the Romans descend on all of us.

The one man, Jesus, would die for the people...not just of the nation...but of the whole world...rather than let the whole world be destroyed. And he wouldn't say one word to stop it. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is to refrain from speaking.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.