

# If You Had Been Here...

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

March 29, 2020/5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

---

Well, these are extraordinary times.

Even ten days ago, I could not have imagined that on the fifth Sunday of Lent I would be trying to figure out how to put together a worship service and preach a sermon to be accessed online.

I want to thank all of the people here in the building this morning who have helped us navigate this new reality, as well as those who have contributed their thoughts via phone, email, etc.

As I thought about what I would say this morning, I went back and forth between trying to do a “business as usual” sermon and a “Coronavirus sermon,” for lack of a better term.

I know that for most of us, “business as usual” sounds pretty good right about now.

But I also that there is nothing normal about these days.

I’m guessing that as you sat down to watch this service, you likely did so already having encountered a lot of bad news today—the COVID-19 stats, the death counts, the economic updates, the losses piling up, the ominous headlines.

I know that some among us are feeling anxious, afraid, lonely, confused, angry, sad, worried or some combination of all of these things.

I want to assure you that I feel or *have* felt each one of these things, too.

So, I decided to try to do both. As it happens, the “business as usual” texts for today speak quite powerfully into our extraordinary moment.

\*\*\*

Our Scripture readings today both take place in the context of calamity.

One is public and concerns the fate of a nation. The other one comes from the more private domain of personal relationships in the village of Bethany.

In both of our passages this morning, the dead take centre stage.

Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley littered with dry bones, the skeletons of the dead. John takes us to a tomb in the side of a hill where Lazarus has been dead for four days.

In both cases, scenes of death, despair, and impossibility are transformed into scenes of life, hope and promise.

The message of both passages is that God—the God of Ezekiel’s vision, the God who took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—has the power to wrench life out of the jaws of death.

But the question asked of Ezekiel in verse three of our reading is a haunting one, isn’t it? Even though we know that God can do all things, this one question expresses all our apprehensions well.

*Can these bones live? I mean, really?*

Or are these visions and stories just fictive consolations for people in desperate need of a bit of hope?

This question feels particularly acute these days, doesn’t it?

In the context of a global pandemic and the physical isolation that it is presently requiring of us, in the context of all the uncertainty, all the ominous headlines we read about this creeping menace that is moving at frightening speed...

“Can these bones live?” is just a more poetic way of saying, “Is there hope? Are we going to be ok?”

Will people we love get sick?

Will hospitals get overrun?

Will we survive this?

Will our church survive this?

Will our economy survive this?

Will I still have a job next month (I know that some of you have already lost a job or are facing reduced hours)?

Will my kids have stable employment in the future?

Will the vulnerable among us survive this—the homeless, the addicted, the refugee, the isolated, the physically compromised?

Will the people without the safety nets of privilege survive this?

*Can these bones live? Can what is dead or dying live again?*

Is there hope, *really*, even when everything seems so fragile, unstable, and uncertain?

These are among the deepest questions that any of us can ever ask. And these are the questions running through many of our minds during this time of pandemic.

\*\*\*

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding “Yes.” Yes, there is hope. There is *always* hope. I believe this in the core of my being.

Our texts this morning invite us into the reality of a God who promises that death is never the last word—a reality where no matter what it may seem like at any given moment, life wins in the end.

**But whatever else we might say about Christian hope, we must say that it is not the sort of hope that magically removes us from suffering, but a hope takes us *through* it.**

We wish suffering could be avoided, don't we? We wish our faith would lift us up above the fray and spare us from pain. I certainly do.

We're not the only ones.

Did you notice how Mary and Martha words responded in a time of crisis, in the aftermath of their brother's death?

They both said exactly the same thing:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Martha does add, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him," leaving the door hopefully open to Jesus' intervention.

But both of them express the most natural sentiment that any of us have when bad things happen, in our world and in our lives.

*Jesus, if you had been here, this bad thing wouldn't have happened...*

*Where were you, Jesus?*

*Where are you in our time of need? Where are you when are eyes and ears are weary with stories of sickness and death and crisis and chaos?*

The assumption underlying this very natural response is that Jesus is a kind of vaccine against bad things happening to us.

This is what we often assume, even if we would never state it this baldly or even admit it to ourselves—that our faith in Jesus is supposed to protect us from harm.

If we believe the right things or do the right things, we will somehow be spared the challenges, the trials, the suffering that frightens and overwhelm us.

But we know that this is not actually true, that this is not how God works.

God is not a vaccine against bad things happening to his people.

It could seem this way in our readings this morning. The dry bones *did* come to life, symbolizing the return of the Israelite exiles from Babylon. Lazarus *did* walk out of the tomb.

Read in isolation, these two passages could give the impression that God

But even though the exiles from Ezekiel's day returned, they would never again be the mighty kingdom of David and Solomon. Soon enough, the people of Israel would be under the boot of another empire, this time Rome, and would continue to struggle to live out their calling as the people of God in a strange land.

In the gospel of John, even though Lazarus walked out of the tomb, he would still die an ordinary human death years later.

And of course, bad things happened to Jesus himself, and to his followers from his first disciples to Christians down through the ages.

Indeed, Jesus promised that his followers should expect to take up their cross and to share in the suffering of the world in imitation of him.

We still live in the in between time, in the now but not yet of Christ's kingdom which has come, is coming, and will one day come in its fullness.

We still live in the land where things die. Where things break down. Where a tiny little virus can bring the whole world to its knees.

We know this, even if we forget from time to time, even if we wish for an easier way. We know that Jesus is not a vaccine against bad things happening to us in this in-between time.

He is, however, God's promise that this in-between time is not the only time, and certainly not the final time or the last word of the story.

Jesus is the promise that God's kingdom will one day come in fullness, where all that comes to kill, steal and destroy will finally be defeated.

**And Jesus is God's promise to be powerfully present with us now, in this time where creation continues to groan in anticipation of this final victory.**

So, in this in-between time, as the church, we are, to borrow Eugene Peterson's wonderful phrase, **"a colony of heaven in the country of death."**

That phrase seems particularly poignant in this time of pandemic, doesn't it?

Even as we gather remotely, even as I have to speak to an empty sanctuary, even as we have to connect through our various technological means, as we seek to keep our physical distance from one another to slow the spread of this virus, even as we seek to find creative ways to meet the needs of our community...

Even in the midst of *all this*, we, the church, are a little "colony of heaven in the country of death."

\*\*\*

I want to end back at the scene in the village of Bethany.

Lazarus's empty tomb prefigures another empty tomb, of course.

In John's gospel, this story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is the last episode before the efforts to kill Jesus take their final, dramatic turn.

We know that soon Jesus will die, cruelly, violently, and unjustly for the sin of the world.

But we also know that the God who promise to breathe life into the raspy dry bones of Ezekiel's vision is the same God who brought back Jesus from the dead.

This is the God we will celebrate in a few weeks, even if our Easter Sunday service will almost certainly look and feel different than it usually does.

This is the one we will worship as we gather in homes around screens—the one who, like Lazarus walked out of the grave.

But the one who, *unlike* Lazarus, left the grave clothes behind, and never died again.

You and I cannot reverse this pandemic. We can do our small parts—handwashing, following Alberta Health guidelines, keeping our physical distance, etc.

But we can't make dry bones live. We can't make the dead rise and walk out of their graves. We can't do much of anything on our own to address our deepest needs and our darkest fears.

It is God who breathes life into the dry bones.

It is Jesus speaks the word of life to Lazarus. These texts are about God's power and promise, not ours.

Life out of death is a God-sized job, and only God can do it.

Our task is to believe, to participate, to trust, to hope, to love, and to proclaim this good news of this good God—even in difficult times.

Our task is to remember that when we are tempted to say, in the face of our own calamity, "Jesus, if you had only been here..."

That in fact, Jesus is right there beside us, saying, "I *am* here, even in the valley of the shadow, even in the midst of all that frightens and overwhelms you, even in the face of all that you don't know and can't predict."

I am here. I have not left you as orphans. I will come to you. I will never leave or forsake you. I will be with you always, until the very end of the age.

May God breathe his life into our bones as we seek to be a community during this time of physical isolation, and as we seek to continue to live into this high and holy calling.

Amen.

