

Sermon for Sunday, March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A

Sermon Text(s): Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

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Our readings for today seem to be getting a little ahead of themselves. They're all about resurrection! God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones to bring them back to life, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and Paul tells us that "he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also" (Romans 8:11).

Resurrection, bringing life from death, is everywhere in these readings. With the exception of the psalm, there's hardly a word anywhere about the Lenten themes of sin and repentance. What's going on here? If Easter is still two weeks off, why all this talk about resurrection in the middle of Lent?

Perhaps it is because we most need to remember the promise of resurrection during times of repentance. Whenever we stop to take a cold, hard look at the ways we are dead in our sins, we need to simultaneously remember the promise that we can and will be made alive through the Spirit of God working in us.

The 40 days of Lent metaphorically recall Jesus's 40 days of temptation in the wilderness and the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, and it is during our own periods of wilderness that we are most in need of resurrection. When we come face to face with our shortcomings, our mortality, and our need, we are most open to the gift of grace and new life that God offers to us. By anticipating the resurrection two weeks before we make it to Easter, our readings today remind us that God's offer of new life is available even in the midst of the wilderness.

And these readings also remind us of something about resurrection that we don't hear as clearly in the Easter passages – they remind us that God invites us to participate in the process of resurrection. In today's passages, the people are not passive bystanders to God's miraculous power to bring life from death; they actually join with God in bringing about resurrection.

Ezekiel joins with God in bringing new life to the dry bones by speaking the words God has given him to speak, and the bystanders in the Gospel join with Jesus in restoring Lazarus to life by moving away the stone from the grave and removing Lazarus's burial clothes.¹ While only God has the power to bring life from death, in these stories, God does not do so without involving others in the process. God could have showed Ezekiel a vision of the dry bones coming back to life without any required words or actions on Ezekiel's part, and God could have moved the stone away from Lazarus's tomb miraculously, without human involvement, and Lazarus could have walked out already unbound from his burial shroud. But for whatever reason, God didn't do it that way. He chose to leave parts of the process for us to do.

It has become somewhat of a catch-phrase in modern theology to talk about people as being "co-creators with God." This idea proposes that human beings partner with God in the maintenance of the created world and in bringing about God's purposes in it. In contrast to a view that sees human beings as entirely passive because "God is in control," this theology insists that human beings are active partners with God in God's redemption of the world.

A common critique of this theology is that it ascribes *too much* power to humans, coming close to saying human beings are equal to God, but the theologian who first coined the term, Phillip Hefner, actually used the phrase "created co-creator." We are not co-creators – as if we were fellow gods in the heavenly court – we are *created* co-creators. We are, in fact, creatures, and the creature is not greater than the creator.

But, because we are created in the image of God who is a creator, we are made to be creators as well. From this perspective, our creative abilities – in the arts, in science and technology, in problem-solving – are seen as a stamp of the divine nature in us. This theology also emphasizes human freedom, because it stresses the ways in which God does not direct every little action that happens on earth, but gives us the freedom of self-determination. No, God does not *need* us to do anything, but rather than exert total and utter control over us, God chooses to leave certain things for us to do, so that we become partners with God in the great work of the divine redemption of the

¹ Insight into the participatory nature of the Gospel passage came from Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011): 101.

world. It is an unequal partnership, to be sure, but it is a partnership all the same.

The people in our readings for today are examples of the created co-creator. They are partners – however unequal – with God in making resurrection happen. Ezekiel delivers the words; the bystanders in the Gospel roll away the stone and remove Lazarus’s burial clothes. They remind us that although God is fully capable of bringing about transformation all by himself, God often asks for our help in doing so. God invites us to participate in the work of resurrection.

The actions that Jesus tells the people to perform in today’s Gospel reading are rather symbolic. His specific instructions to them are, “Take away the stone,” and “Unbind him and let him go.” Although we can assume the people were invited to do these things in a literal sense for very practical reasons, the stories in John’s Gospel always have a deeper symbolic meaning.

Jesus invites us to participate in the work of resurrection by taking away the stones – the obstacles in our lives and in the lives of others that prevent the power of God from reaching us. I’m sure we’ve all known people who have constructed such emotional walls around themselves that they shut out everyone around them, and even shut out God. We might have even done this in our own lives at some point. There is a saying of Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, who relates that God said to him, “O Son of Being! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee.”² We must give love in order to be open to receiving love. If we do not take away the stones from the entrance to our hearts, the power of resurrection can in no way reach us.

Jesus also invites us to participate in the work of resurrection by doing the difficult work of unbinding the shroud of death. Even though he had been restored to life, Lazarus’s freedom was still restricted by the shroud tied around him until the people unbound him and let him go. Likewise, even if we have received the gift of new life through the resurrection in our baptism, we too can remain bound by our old burial shroud of sin and death, unless we do our part in the resurrection process and work to loosen those bonds.

² Baha’u’llah, *The Hidden Words of Baha’u’llah*. U.S. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985 reprint. Accessed online at <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/HW/hw-6.html>, 30 March 2014.

We must do the difficult internal work of unbinding the painful memories, the negative self-talk, the grudges and resentments – whatever keeps us bound to the ways of sin and death. We must cut loose those cords in order to experience the full power of the liberation given to us in the resurrection.

And often, that process requires the help of others. Just as Lazarus could not untie himself, and certainly could not have moved the stone away from his grave while he was still dead, so we too sometimes must rely on others to help us move the stones and unbind the shrouds in our lives – therapists, spiritual directors, friends, mentors. Those helpers cannot do the work for us, but they can assist us, and provide companionship and support as we do this difficult work.

And while others have a part to play in our liberation, we also have a part to play in theirs, because the two are inextricably linked. As we strive to do the difficult spiritual work of opening ourselves to God and others, of rolling away the stones and unbinding the shroud of death, we often find that our best guides and companions on the way are those people who know something about rolling away stones and unbinding shrouds because they have done so in their own lives, those people who have been there and have found a way through.

So maybe it's not so out of character to think about resurrection during Lent after all. For it is only when we have experienced resurrection in the midst of our own wilderness that we are able to understand how to participate more fully in God's redemptive work in the world and to help others in their quest for liberation.