

“Giving Up Our Lives”

April 2, 2017

Giving It Up series – Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Giving Up” is our focus in the season of spiritual preparation so that we’re ready to embrace the glory of Easter. So why the focus on these two Scriptures? Why read this long account from John about Jesus waiting too long to go to Lazarus? Mary and Martha ticked off that he waited - but then this incredible miracle?

Why do we spend time with Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones? Because both of those passages force us to deal with the reality of death. I’m aware that some of us are dealing with it - and it’s so fresh - or it feels fresh whether it’s recent or not. Death is the great equalizer. We all deal with it. We all have to deal with it, but we don’t want to.

My friend who lost her mom earlier this year had a poignant moment of missing her this week. My friend was sick, and even though she’s 40 years old, she would always call her mom for comfort. Maybe you can relate. Those moments of pain and grief are real and no less painful even as we hold onto faith that God loves us, cares for us, and never leaves us.

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus was clear that giving up our lives was a part of living faithfully. It wasn’t about disregarding the importance of our lives, but rather seeing our lives in light of who Jesus is and what he calls us to do. We read some version of it in all four Gospel accounts where Jesus says: “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” Put another way by Eugene Peterson: “If you don’t go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don’t deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.”

Powerful and difficult words from Jesus, but a reminder that even though we tend to have definite ideas about life and death, even though in our humanity, we may cling to “me-first” thinking, Jesus offers another way.

Throughout time, God attempts to change our thinking about life and death so that we might know that God is always offering eternal life not at some point off in the future, but even now!

It’s difficult to hear Ezekiel’s vision and not let your imagination go. Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, points out that there’s no definitive date on Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones because every single generation needs to hear, in its own time, that these bones can live again. We all need to hear words of hope.

Can these bones live? God only knows, Ezekiel says. I wonder if Ezekiel's thinking, "Yeah, right, God – like these bones could live!" But notice he doesn't answer God with a definitive yes or no, but recognizes God's power. Ezekiel's vision is about God's grace to us – that God would take the initiative to bring hope and restoration.

Ezekiel was a priest, and for him to be amid these piles of bones meant defilement and impurity. He wasn't supposed to be near them, but God puts him there. To be present in this valley of dry bones was bad enough, but to be told to prophesy to them was even worse!

So the next time you feel overwhelmed by a task you're facing, remember Ezekiel. He had to preach to a valley of dry bones! Israel was in exile in Babylon – and Ezekiel is the prophet appointed by God in that time and place.

Already Ezekiel has brought God's judgment on Israel and other nations. It must have seemed like the end of the line for them – nothing could be worse. Now this vision of hope and restoration – probably hard for them to believe. They've been in Babylon – away from home – for around ten years. So their sense of loss is more than just personal; it's also national. They're disconnected; their spirits are dried up – like the bones strewn all over this valley.

So to hear that God is still present and working in the midst of exile is powerful. There's nowhere that God can't reach us and bring new life. It's not something we have to wait for. It's ours to receive here and now!

Just like Ezekiel faced death, everyone around Lazarus did, too. Lazarus is very much not alive. And this is one of two times when we're told Jesus wept. He stares death in the face when he goes to the tomb where Lazarus' body rests. He prays, calls Lazarus to come out, which he does, and then tells the people around to unbind him and let him go.

It's always interesting to me that we don't hear from Lazarus, but we do hear that people believed in Jesus when they saw this miracle. To talk about resurrection is difficult. We know Martha believed in resurrection as a part of Jewish thought that she had been taught. But to truly embrace it on this side of the grave was difficult for her, no less than it is for us.

Jesus says that he is the resurrection. He is the life. It is in him that we find hope beyond this life. It's in him that we find joy and peace. But resurrection implies that something happens - something changes. God is doing something new. God is making something possible that seemed impossible.

This miracle at Lazarus' tomb is an important turning point for Jesus. From here, the tension grows. Lazarus is even targeted because he's the object of Jesus' miracle.

Lazarus will not live forever, but the work that Jesus does, the power that he shows, the glory of God that he displays, brings hope and possibility.

We want to trust that God can bring new possibilities when we can't see them. We want to trust that God can do what is impossible - that God can bring joy where there is sorrow, potential where there are problems, forgiveness where there's none, healing where there's sickness, relationship where there's disconnection.

Ezekiel saw a vision that gave him hope. Martha trusted in Jesus. Lazarus came out of the tomb. He was brought back to life - and this miracle showed the power of resurrection - to trust God to do more than what we see is possible - not at some point later on, but even now!

Jesus didn't come to tell us about heaven or about what heaven will be like. He talked about the Kingdom of heaven, which is here and now. He came to tell us about the power we have now and invite us to experience the joy of eternal life and hope right now!

That's a word of hope today. We need to hear God's voice again. God says, "I will put my spirit in you and you will live." A boat can be restored, but it takes winds in the sails to get it moving again. Surgeons can reattach limbs to the body, but it takes the life-force of the body to energize the nerves and get those limbs moving again. For you and me, for the church, it takes the breath of God's Spirit to bring life. We can't find life all by ourselves!

After all, when the people of Israel felt that all hope was lost in Babylon, God said, "You shall live." When Jesus was rejected, beaten, and killed on a cross, God said, "You shall live." When the early church and the church in many places still faces persecution, God says, "You shall live." When we were "dead in trespasses and sins," God says, "You shall live."

When we're stuck, at the end of our rope with no place to go, without hope, God says, "You shall live." We hear God say, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." Friends, God doesn't say, "Pull yourself together." God helps us to be restored and renewed in God's grace because God is good and offers new life!

May God help us to give up our lives - so that we might truly embrace the gift of eternal life and live it now.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

As we prepare to come to the table of the Lord, God meets us here and seeks to put us back together by God's grace. We do this in remembrance of Jesus - of who he is and what God does for us through his life, death, and resurrection. May we offer our lives in prayer.