



Valley of the Dry Bones by Gustav Dore'

When Lent 5 in Year “A” rolls around, I always feel a little down. I revisit a couple of questions which were foremost in my mind my first full year in Ordained Ministry when it came time to preach on this morning’s passages. These questions were, “Why is God letting this happen? Couldn’t he have done **something** so that we didn’t have to go through this?” Those first two weeks in early Spring had been pretty tough. I’d just lost a parishioner who had become a really close friend during my early time in the Parish.. A Seminary classmates from Uganda on whom the mark of God’s presence was so clear, Moses Rowothro, had died suddenly of an freakish kind of ambulism :.And the hatchling’s in a Wren’s nest that Donna and I had been observing each morning on the front porch of the Rectory had been destroyed by a hungry neighbor-hood cat. And so I kept saying quietly to myself, “Why is God letting this happen? Couldn’t he have done **something** so that we didn’t have to go

through this?” You see, I was going through my own valley of dry bones. Why? Why do you make us walk through these desolate places, Lord? Don’t you love us?

In Ezekiel’s account there is a certain word used at least 10 times. It is the Hebrew word *Ruah*. It is the word for “breath: or “wind.” It’s also the word used for The Spirit. You see *Ruah* was the word used by the Old Testament authors to name the “Spirit of God.” The most astounding verse in Ezekiel 37 is for me is verse 9: “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. [Breathe upon these dry bones that they may live!]” How strange that Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to the breath. What can that mean?

In the Gospel reading this morning, we have the astounding miracle of Lazarus being brought back to life. It’s a remarkable passage for several reasons: (1) It’s the only account in John where Jesus actually restores life to the dead during his earthly walk (Not like the Synoptics, which recount the restoration to life of the widow’s son from Nain, and Jairus’s daughter). (2) You probably know that this chapter from John’s Gospel has the shortest verse in the Bible, Jn.11:35 “Jesus wept.” (3) This passage contains the proclamation of faith by Thomas who in verse 16 says, “Let us go with Jesus to Judea that we may die with him.” I think Thomas really gets a bad wrap. Yes, he doubted the Lord’s resurrection, but there were also moments, like this one, of complete and utter devotion to Jesus in the person of Thomas. And aren’t we really all like Thomas, strange, schizophrenic mixtures of doubt and devotion?

There is something incredibly special about this Chapter. It marks some kind of turning point. We can see this if we look at what happens immediately after the raising of Lazarus. In the very next Chapter, in John 12, we have the bathing of Jesus’s feet by Mary of Bethany. What you may not have realized is that this is a ceremony of anointing. This is the public declaration of God’s special blessing. Just like David’s anointing in last week’s passage from 1 Samuel 17.

What is the purpose of this special anointing, this special blessing by God? Well, Paul talks about it this morning in the Epistle from Romans 6. Paul says that the end of our anointing by God, the end of our slavery to sin, our freedom from the bondage of this broken world comes when we receive a life of sanctification.

The advantage of our free gift of grace, says Paul, is that we Christians may have an earthly journey to the cross bearing the awesome gift of leading a sanctified life, and thus walking hand-in-hand with the incredible person of none other than The Father. Thus we share with Our Precious Lord in His anointing as children of the Living God.

But, how do we get there? How do we arrive in that place of Sanctification? Well, a critical thing which makes the events of John 11 and the raising of Lazarus such a turning point in the Gospel story is not only what happens immediately following it, but actually what happens just beforehand.

Remember, by this point in John's Gospel, Jesus has turned water into wine. He's miraculously healed the Royal Official's son of his illness. He's made a cripple man pick up his mat and walk at the pool of Bethesda. He's walked on water. He's fed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and two fish. And finally he's restored sight to a man blind from birth, something that we are told had never happened before in the recorded history of mankind.

And what has the reaction of the Jews been to all these amazing signs of love and wonder? John 10 recounts that because Jesus did these things for the Children of God, because Jesus performed all these wondrous miracles for the children the Father loved so much, we are told that their reaction was to pick up rocks along the roadside, rush at him as an angry mob and to try and slaughter the Lord by stoning Him to death. So, Jesus had to escape from Judea, and go back across the Jordan River, to the place he had been Baptized by John. .And so, before the miracle of this morning when Lazarus was raised from the tomb, after all of those miracles, after performing all those amazing acts of love among God's children, Jesus was chased like a common thief and liar all the way back to where His ministry started.

It must have been, for Him, like starting over from scratch, as though nothing He had done had made a single shred of difference. Can you imagine the valley of dry bones He must have been walking through?

"Why, God? Why do you let me walk through these places of death? Why do you make me go through the valley of dry bones?" That's what I was asking the father all those years ago when I was going through the valley of the shadow of death, and he answered me one night. And I wrote down what he told me:

"My son, I lead you through these places of dryness, so that you too may call on the breath of my Spirit. I make you walk these desolate plains so that there is nothing left to sustain you but your faith in my love. For only when you come to see that the one thing which matters is my love for you, only when you see clearly that the only light bright enough for your times of abject darkness and pain is my light, only when you come to know that only my grace is the grace which can never fail to bind the hurting wounds of this world, only, my son, when you have walked through the valley of the shadow of death can you truly learn to fear no evil. For only in the valley of the dry bones will you have to call with utter faith on the living breath of my Holy Spirit. And then, my son, when you have walked in the valley of the dry bones, I will raise you up, I will raise you up to a joyous life of sanctification in my love. And then, my child, you will truly know that I am God, and you will never be orphaned again.

In The name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+, 3-30-2017