**Fifth Sunday in Lent A**

**Incarnation Lutheran Church**

**BONES TO LIFE**

 **IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE – BUT HERE WE ARE – THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT. NEXT SUNDAY IS PALM SUNDAY/PASSION SUNDAY – THEN COMES HOLY WEEK, MAUNDY THURSDAY, GOOD FRIDAY, HOLY SATURDAY – AND THEN EASTER. SO THERE COULD BE NO BETTER GOSPEL TEXT TO PREPARE US FOR THOSE HOLY DAYS AND THE MOST HOLIEST DAY OF ALL, EASTER, THAN THIS STORY OF THE RESTORATION TO LIFE OF LAZARUS. IT’S THE SEVENTH AND MOST PROFOUND OF THE SIGNS JOHN INCLUDES IN HIS GOSPEL TO PROCLAIM THAT JESUS IS INDEED THE MESSIAH, THE ONE COMING INTO THE WORLD, THE CHRIST. AND I WILL GET THERE – BUT FIRST, EZEKIEL, OUR FIRST READING FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT.**

 **EZEKIEL WAS BOTH PROPHET AND PRIEST IN THE DAYS BEFORE AND AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE TEMPLE IN THE YEAR 587 BCE. WHEN NEBUCHADNEZZAR, KING OF BABYLON, CONQUERED JERUSALEM FOR THE SECOND TIME, THIS TIME COMPLETELY DESTROYING THE CITY AND THE TEMPLE, ABOUT 25% OF ISRAEL’S POPULATION, MANY OF WHOM WERE ISRAEL’S POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS, INCLUDING ISRAEL’S KING JEHOIACHIN, AND MOSTLY LIKELY EZEKIEL HIMSELF, WERE TAKEN INTO CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON. JERUSALEM ITSELF WAS INDEED REDUCED TO RUBBLE AND DESOLATION BUT WHILE SOME COUNTRY VILLAGES WERE LEFT INTACT THEY WERE NOT UNSCATHED BY BABYLON’S INVASION. SO, IN REALITY, THE WHOLE NATION WAS IN TURMOIL. JUST IMAGINE IF YOU WILL, A NATION COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY THE ENEMY. THEIR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT, AS BAD AND INEFFECTIVE AS IT HAD BEEN, GONE. THEIR LIVELIHOOD GONE; ECONOMY DESTROYED. THEIR ACCESS TO EVERY DAY NEEDS LIMITED AT BEST, IF NOT GONE. THEIR ROADS, THEIR MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, GONE. THEIR TEMPLE, SOLOMON’S TEMPLE, THE DWELLING PLACE OF ISRAEL’S GOD, THE VERY FABRIC OF WHO THEY WERE AS GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE - GONE AND WITH IT THEIR RELIGIOUS LEADERS. THEY WERE A NATION ON THE BRINK OF COMPLETE ANNIHILATION.**

 **SOUND FAMILIAR? ARE NOT WE, OUR NATION, IN FACT VIRTUALLY EVERY NATION ON THIS EARTH, UNDER SEIGE? PERHAPS NOT IN THESE SAME ANCIENT WAYS BUT UNDER SEIGE NONETHELESS. OUR ENEMY IS A VIRUS - COVID-19 – THE CORONA VIRUS - A NEW VIRUS FOR WHICH THERE IS NO KNOWN CURE, NOT EVEN AN ESTABLISHED MEDICAL TREATMENT PLAN. AT ONE EXTREME, WE HAVE THOSE POSSESSED BY ANXIETY AND FEAR; AT THE OTHER; THOSE WHO THINK IT IS ALL AN EXAGGERATED HOAX – NO NEED TO LISTEN TO OR FOLLOW MEDICAL GUIDELINES. AND THEN THERE’S THE LARGE GROUP IN THE MIDDLE DOING THEIR BEST TO LISTEN TO AND OBEY CDC GUIDELINES: SOCIAL DISTANCING, SHELTER IN PLACE, SELF-ISOLATION – AND YET THE VIRUS RAGES. HOT SPOTS ARE EMERGING ALMOST DAILY. HOSPITALS ARE FULL. MAKESHIFT MORGUES BEING SET UP. MILITARY HOSPITAL SHIPS MOVING IN TO PROVIDE NEEDED HOSPITAL SPACE. PROTECTIVE WEAR FOR OUR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS SCARCE IF NOT COMPLETELY UNAVAILABLE. TESTING KITS IN SHORT SUPPLY, VENTILATORS STRESSED TO THE LIMITS. SCHOOLS CLOSED. CHURCHES CLOSED. THERE’S GENUINE FEAR FOR OUR ECONOMY. SURELY, WE KNOW IN OUR OWN 21ST CENTURY WAY WHAT IT WAS LIKE FOR THOSE ANCIENT ISRAELITES SO LONG AGO. SCARED, STRESSED, DISCONNECTED, BLAMING, DOUBTING. CONFUSED, EXHAUSTED. WE’RE RIGHT THERE WITH THEM.**

**AND IT IS INTO THAT KIND OF WORLD -THEN AND NOW – THAT EZEKIAL BRINGS HIS MESSAGE OF HOPE AND PROMISE AS GOD LEADS EZEKIEL TO THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES. THESE ARE THE BONES OF THE NATION OF ISRAEL – A PEOPLE WITHOUT HOPE. AND GOD PROMISES: “I AM GOING TO OPEN YOUR GRAVES, AND BRING YOU UP FROM YOUR GRAVES, O MY PEOPLE…I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, AND YOU SHALL LIVE…” AND THE BREATH OF GOD, THE BREATH OF GOD THAT MOVED AT CREATION AND BROUGHT ALL THINGS INTO BEING, BREATHED LIFE INTO THOSE DRY BONES AND THEY LIVED.**

 **THAT SAME BREATH, THIS TIME THE BREATH OF THE INCARNATE GOD, BREATHED LIFE BACK INTO THE DRY BONES OF LAZARUS. WHAT A POWERFUL STORY! FRUSTRATION ABOUNDS. JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM JERUSALEM BECAUSE THE PLOTS TO KILL HIM ARE INTENSIFYING. JESUS IS FRUSTRATED. THE AUTHORITIES ARE FRUSTRATED THAT THEY CAN’T SHUT HIM UP. THE DISCIPLES ARE FRUSTRATED BECAUSE THEY CAN’T SEEM TO CONTROL JESUS, LET ALONE FIGURE OUT WHAT HE’S UP TO. MARY AND MARTHA ARE FRUSTRATED WITH JESUS. HE DIDN’T COME WHEN THEY SENT FOR HIM AND IF HE HAD, THEIR BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED. FRUSTRATION ABOUNDS.**

**WE SURELY KNOW FRUSTRATION, DON’T WE? HOW TO KEEP KIDS OCCUPIED AND HAPPY…HOW TO KEEP ONE ANOTHER SAFE…HOW TO KEEP THE ECONOMY GOING…HOW TO KEEP A CONGREGATION SEPARATELY TOGETHER! HOW TO TEACH AN OLD PASTOR TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA! FRUSTRATION ABOUNDS.**

**AND IN THE MIDST OF ALL THEIR FRUSTRATION AND OURS, JESUS BREATHES LIFE. THAT DAY HE PRAYS AND THEN HE COMMANDS, “LAZARUS, COME OUT.” AND HE DOES. IN THE WATERS OF BAPTISM, GOD SAYS TO US, “COME OUT – COME OUT FROM DEATH TO LIFE.” AND WE DO. THE BREATH OF THE LORD, THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD SPEAKS, AND DEATH IS DEFEATED.**

 **IN THIS STORY OF THE RESTORATION OF LIFE TO LAZARUS, JESUS SAYS TO MARTHA, “I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN ME, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIE, WILL LIVE AND EVERYONE WHO LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?” SHE SAID TO HIM, “YES, LORD, I BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, THE ONE COMING INTO THE WORLD.” AND THERE IT IS! THE PROMISE AND HOPE THROUGH THE WORDS OF EZEKIEL TO THE NATION OF ISRAEL FULFILLED – THE PROMISE AND HOPE OF THE CROSS FULFILLED FOR ALL THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD – NOT BECAUSE WE HAVE FOUND OUR WAY OUT OF THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES BUT THAT GOD HAS FOUND GOD’S WAY IN.**

 **THERE’S A FOOTNOTE I THINK WORTH CONSIDERING. THOSE ISRAELITES IN CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON WERE NOT COMPLETELY ENSLAVED. THEY TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THEIR TIME IN CAPTIVITY TO LEARN. THEY LEARNED FARMING, WEAVING, DYEING OF CLOTH, METAL-WORKING – ALL OF WHICH THEY TOOK BACK HOME WITH THEM WHEN THE EXILE WAS OVER. THEY LEARNED FINANCIAL SKILLS FROM THE EXPERT BABYLONIAN BANKERS, INCLUDING THE USE OF COINED MONEY, WHICH ULTIMATELY ENABLED THEM TO CONTRIBUTE FINANCIALLY TO THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE. THEY LEARNED A BETTER SYSTEM OF WEIGHTS AND MEASUREMENTS. THEY LEARNED ASTRONOMY. THEY LEARNED HOW TO IMPROVISE THEIR OWN SYNAGOGUE SYSTEM. THEY LEARNED TO WRITE DOWN THEIR LAWS AND SACRED TEACHINGS.**

**WELL, YOU GET THE POINT. THEY DID NOT LET CAPTIVITY BIND THEM. NEITHER CAN WE. WHILE WE ARE IN CAPTIVITY, WE, TOO, BOTH AS INDIVIDUALS AND A NATION AND MOST ESPECIALLY WE AS THE CHURCH, MUST CHOOSE NOT TO BE BOUND BY THIS PANDEMIC. RATHER, WE MUST CHOOSE TO BE CREATIVE AND RESOUCEFUL. I PRAY OUR GOVERNMENT LEADERS AND ALL THE LEADERS OF THE WORLD - ECONOMISTS, MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, STRATEGIC PLANNERS, EDUCATORS, AND THE LIKE, EVEN POLITICIANS – DISCOVER NEW WAYS OF BEING THAT NOT ONLY HELP US SURVIVE IN THESE “DRY BONE” DAYS BUT IMPROVE AND ENHANCE LIFE WHEN OUR EXILE IS OVER. AND I PRAY THE SAME FOR THE CHURCH. THERE’S A SPIRITUAL HUNGER IN OUR LAND THAT THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH, AT LEAST MAINLINE CHRISTIANITY, WAS FAILING TO FEED. AND NOW LOOK. WE ARE SPREADING THE GOSPEL THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA AND WE ARE REACHING NOT JUST TO OUR ESTABLISHED FAITH COMMUNITIES BUT THE CURIOUS, THE SKEPTICAL AND THE DOUBTERS, EVEN THE UNBELIEVERS AS WELL. WE ARE LEARNING HOW TO BE CHURCH IN THIS 21ST CENTURY. AND AGAIN, LESSONS TO ENHANCE AND GROW THE CHURCH WHEN OUR EXILE IS OVER.**

**“IF ONLY YOU HAD BEEN HERE,” MARTHA AND MARY SAID TO JESUS, “OUR BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED.” AND JESUS TURNED THEIR “IF ONLY’S” TO “IF” – TRANSLATED “SINCE.” SINCE JESUS IS THE ONE COMING INTO THE WORLD, SINCE JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, SINCE JESUS IS GOD’S ONLY SON, SINCE JESUS IS THE RESURRECTION – IN PERSON – SINCE ALL THIS IS TRUE – THEY AND WE KNOW AND TRUST THAT DRY BONES LIVE. PANDEMICS DO NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. ECONOMIC CRISES DO NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. GOD DOES – AND GOD’S LAST WORD IS THE CROSS AND EMPTY TOMB. GOD’S LAST WORD IS THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT BREATHED INTO US AT CREATION. GOD’S LAST WORD IS THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT BREATHED INTO US THROUGH THE WATERS OF BAPTISM. GOD’S LAST WORD IS THE BREATH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT SUSTAINING US IN THIS LIFE WITH ALL ITS TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS. GOD’S LAST WORD IS THE BREATH BREATHED INTO US AT THE TIME OF OUR EARTHLY DEATH. GOD’S LAST WORD IS THIS: “DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. I DO. AND MY LAST WORD IS LIFE – LIFE NOW…LIFE FOREVER. “THAT’S THE HOPE AND PROMISE EZEKIEL PROCLAIMED TO ISRAEL IN EXILE. THAT’S THE HOPE AND PROMISE FULFILLED IN THE RESTORATION OF LIFE TO LAZARUS. THAT’S THE HOPE AND PROMISE OF THE CROSS AND EMPTY TOMB. THAT’S OUR HOPE. THAT’S OUR PROMISE. AND GOD ALWAYS KEEPS GOD’S PROMISE. AMEN.**