Lent 5 “Lord, if you had been here”

March 29, 2020

## It’s not easy being dead.

Well, sometimes it’s not easy being alive, either

You know what I mean, don’t you? Especially in this time, this almost-apocalyptic time, when we are forced back to ourselves, our homes, our own resources and are reinventing ourselves in a world of social distancing and cocooning and introspection. It’s not an easy time, even when we are trying to be hopeful.

Today’s texts, the Hebrew Scriptures text of the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones, and the Gospel story of Jesus facing the death of a dear friend, resonate deeply with this awkward and fearful time in which we find ourselves. They balance the twin engines of grief, and hope.

Let’s start with grief, shall we? And there’s a reason for that. One is that grief is an emotion that we too often want to skip over and put behind us. That’s true for almost all of us, but it’s a particularly Christian failing as well. The Christian message, we know, is one of hope and of victory over loss and death. Because that’s so we often want to rush there, ignoring pain and loss and hurt, and get to the victory dance. I see it all the time.And because of our inherent addiction to “happy endings” as well.

My experience, though, is that we are not allowed to just skip past grief and loss, and pretend that they don’t exist. It’s not realistic, it’s not psychologically healthy, it’s not even possible in most cases. And it’s not Biblical.

## Grief is Biblical

Biblical is Ezekiel, the Exile prophet. It’s not a victory story. Ezekiel was in a refugee camp in Babylon, held captive after Jerusalem surrendered to King Nebuchadrezzar in 597 BCE. A number of Israelites, Ezekiel among them, were forcibly deported to Babylon. His prophecies begin then. The first chapters of the book of his visions (Chapters 1-33) are judgmental, suggesting that the people got exactly what they deserved for their faithlessness. The Israelites rose up a second time against Babylon, and a second deportation brought even more captives to Babylon. During this time, Ezekiel was silent, but then he began to prophesy again, with a very different message: despite the disaster, despite the captivity, despite the fact that God seemed to have left God’s people in the dust, they were not alone. God, had, in fact, gone into Exile with them! That’s a powerful message.

And then this vision of hopefulness. As Ezekiel looks at his ruined nation, he sees a valley of dry bones. And he cannot but wonder, “Can these bones live?” In fact, that is God’s question to him, and his answer is suitably religious and non-committal: “God, you know.”

Yes, we know. We know that there are plenty of dry valleys. Not only in our lives, but in lives around us. Lives that are simply being measured out, day by day, without purpose or focus. Or joy.

And there are good reasons, often. We may have the grief of having lost a loved one, or even the accumulated loss of having lost several people. We may have lost a job, an opportunity, a safety net. We may have lost a place where we felt loved, secure, and honoured.

“7 out of 10 young adults around the world (ages 18-35) said that events around the world in other societies affect them, but only 1 in 3 said that somebody that they knew deeply believed in or cared for them.”

— David Kinnaman, President and Strategic Leader of The Barna Group

Biblical is Jesus, in this gospel story of the death of Lazarus, weeping at the grave of his friend. I confess that when I read this, I hear echoes of many, many funeral services that I have attended or officiated. In fact, it’s one of the texts I most often read at funerals, because it is so desperately true to life. Jesus is called to the sickbed of his dear friend Lazarus. We’re told that he delayed two days – and the reason given is a good and holy one; “it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Something about that doesn’t quite ring true, even if it is true. In any case, Jesus himself got caught up in very human emotions rather than God’s glory, when he arrived. First, he was met by Martha, who speaks in plain language:

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

Jesus responds with the hopeful words of resurrection … as he should. This is a teachable moment.

## Grief is Human

But then comes the verse that I cherish, because it reminds me of how human Jesus is. How common and human grief is.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved … Jesus wept.

Knowing … knowing … that Lazarus would soon be restored to life. Knowing … knowing … that the very presence of Jesus meant life itself. Knowing … knowing … that he himself was the resurrection and life. Even knowing all that … he wept.

One of the books I have turned to over and over is a little book (50 pages) that, I discover, I don’t have on my shelves. I know perfectly well why I don’t have it, of course. It’s because I’ve given it away again. I’ve given away dozens of copies over the years. It’s a book by Granger Westberg called, “Good Grief” and the title alone is enough to commend it. Westberg writes simply and effectively about the complexity of grief, and how deeply personal it is, through the various expressions of shock, emotion, depression, physical distress, panic, guilt, anger, resistance, hope, and acceptance. Acceptance, though, for him, is not resignation or giving in, but the ongoing struggle to affirm reality.

What I love most is the title, which reminds me of the goodness even of grief. Instead of “getting over it” we are reminded that it is an essential part of our very human living. In fact, we are daily facing small griefs and losses, and how we deal with those determine how we will live.

There’s another part of this story I love, because it is about the human experience. With a voice of power, Jesus calls to Lazarus, “Lazarus, come out!” And the resurrected one comes from the grave. But he comes, still wrapped and encumbered by his grave clothes. Jesus gives the crowd the opportunity to show caring and compassion, by telling them to “unbind him, and let him go.”

These texts are just made for the big screen!

## How then do we live?

Perhaps it’s a peculiarly Western theme, or maybe it’s just the spirit of our age, but I get blocked by the thought expressed in the common phrase, “Go big or go home!” It’s a sentiment that appeals to our sense of drama, and excitement. It suggests that there are only two options: make a big splash, a big commitment, a big show … or quit. Now, I don’t believe that, not really, but there are some weeks when I find myself responding to the either/or-ness of such a sentiment. This is one of those weeks.

I have, and had, great plans of doing online sermons. After all, I’ve read lots of websites about how to do podcasts, live-streams, interactive communicative modularity protocols (okay, I made that last one up). I’ve been getting myself ready for the 21st Century for thirty years now. And, although I’m not digitally native, I do speak a few phrases.

Just enough to psych myself out, though. Because I’ve got high expectations about high production values, with proper lighting and multiple camera angles and proper sound editing. And, I am realizing, that I just can’t go big with a decade-old computer and a cell phone.

And this week, the scripture readings cry out for the big screen, for the swelling orchestra, for the multimedia effects. Raising the dead! That is two awesome to fit on a 1920x1280 screen. Or less.

“Son of man, can this video sermon live?” “O Lord God, thou knowest.”

I know how Ezekiel feels. Like him, I’m tempted to give the pious answer, “God, you know everything. I’m not going to commit to an answer. You know it all.”

Go big or go home? I am home. We all are. And we’re not going big, most of us. At least, not all the time. In fact, some days, we find ourselves shrinking.

## How then do we live?

There are a few lessons we can draw from these scriptures. They match up with some of the best we have learned from our own life experience (this is how the Word of God works with us; we come from our daily life to the word of life, and recognize echoes of what we know. Then we hear new voices from the witness of those who heard God clearly enough to write it down, once, to be picked up by others like us who said, “yes, that’s what I meant, that’s what I heard.” And we pass it along to others, the timeless truth wrapped in the time-bound moment of our own lives, and it echoes again. That is a living word).

So this is what we know, and what we are learning again:

1. Do not be afraid to grieve what is lost.

We are grief-denying folks, and that often means that we miss the reality of life. Don’t do that. Be mindful of that which gets lost in your life. Be aware of what you are losing right now as we separate ourselves for safety. Be aware of the times you are close to despair, or frustration, because you have lost your naiveté about how people can be. Acknowledge that you are not able to do some of the things now in your life that you used to be able to do – whether it’s age, or responsibilities, or paths not taken. Grieve what’s gone.

1. Celebrate the lostness of those things.

We too often focus on the simple hurt of grief – the loneliness, the loss of purpose, the sense of unfairness, and that’s why we want to hurry through it. But grief is not just hurt. It is a pain that can strengthen us; not instantly, but slowly and surely. We grieve because we lose something or someone precious. That alone can make us grateful that we have been given a gift in the past. That alone can make us hopeful that we can be given a gift again.

Grief can help us crave new life.

1. Not just surviving, but thriving.

As part of my work with soldiers, and with people in disasters, I’ve worked with some very inspiring individuals who have suffered severe stress following a trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is real and can be crippling, not only to the individuals who suffer, but those who suffer alongside them. And recovery can be slow, or appear to be non-existent.

But one of the realities we’ve seen is that people can not only survive trauma, they can actually grow from the event. Post-traumatic growth is possible, and though it doesn’t occur simply or always, it can occur. People who have faced deep trauma can learn to trust again, to reach out to others, to work through their fears, and to go through the valleys of the shadows of death. And, what is often most important, they are often able to inspire and encourage others.

They learn to live as those who are not afraid to die, and not afraid to grieve what they have lost. But they are able to seek blessing for themselves and others, on the other side. They know that dry bones can be made whole again. They know that life is stronger than death.

1. We are not alone.

And that’s not just in the sense that God is with us, though that is certainly true. But, let’s face it, God can be hardest to find when we are caught up in loss, and see nothing but death and dryness. So, we give thanks for not being alone: because help comes from outside ourselves.

* When someone offers a prophetic word, a word of confidence, a word of hopefulness. Sometimes, “you can do it” from someone we believe in, and who believes in us, can be enough to make it true. Trust the words that point to life beyond death.
* When we encounter a grace-filled moment: a flash of beautiful sunshine, or a chord of beautiful music, or an encounter with something divine that makes us think, “God was in this place”, then cherish those moments. Don’t discount them. Don’t assume they won’t last, or that they won’t come again. You will laugh again.
* And give thanks for those around you whose simple actions make all the difference. Those who unbind you, unwrap you from your tangles when you can’t. Those who are thoughtful, and remind you of your best self. Those who weep with you, and sing with you, and laugh with you.

Because that is where the seeds of resurrection and life are found.

