

John 11:1-45

Our Old Testament lesson for today from the Book of Ezekiel, reminds me of the African-American spiritual, "Dry Bones." I recall teaching a lesson about it years ago to the children in grades 1-3, at the parochial school where I was a music teacher. My preparation included tracing "bones" from a pattern onto white posterboard, and cutting them out. The children's lesson included assembling the "dry bones" so they looked like an actual skeleton, and then connecting the bones with metal clasps. I recall the children singing and dancing to the song. Some of the children made the skeletons "come to life," by moving them as if they were walking around, as we sang, "Ezekiel connected dem dry bones, Ezekiel connected dem dry bones, Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones, Now hear the word of the Lord." They also sang Chorus 1: "Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around...Now hear the word of the Lord," and Chorus 2: "Dem bones, dem bones, gonna rise again...Now hear the word of the Lord."

This was a very fun activity, and a way to encourage the children to learn about Ezekiel 37:1-14. The song, like the scripture passage, highlights the fact that the dry bones come to life when they "hear the word of the Lord." That is the message of our Old Testament and gospel lessons for today. Through hearing these verses, we recognize that God's word brings life to that which was thought to be dead. God's power....brings.... hope.

In our gospel passage today, Mary and Martha have sent a message to Jesus informing him that their brother Lazarus is ill. But unlike most persons who would attempt to go to see Lazarus as soon as possible, Jesus responds in a surprising way.....he waits. He waits not one, but two days, before going to see Lazarus. We wonder, why would Jesus not go to see Lazarus right away? Wouldn't Jesus want to model for the disciples and his other followers that going to see a sick friend is important? Jesus says to the disciples, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Like the man born blind in our scripture passage of last week, Jesus explains that there is a greater purpose for Lazarus' illness. While I do not believe that Jesus intentionally causes people to be born blind or to become ill, Jesus knows he has a special mission to accomplish in relation to Lazarus' illness. It is a mission that is beyond human understanding. It is a mission that is impossible for human beings to understand, because we think in earthly, cause and effect ways-- if someone dies, they cannot come back to life. They are not sleeping. They will not be with us again on earth. But as we see in this pericope, death in Jesus' mind does not equate with death forever and ever. It is not a given cause and effect relationship. So, Jesus tells the disciples after two days delay that now they will go to Judea. He says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples do not understand. Lazarus is sleeping? Why is Jesus going there to wake him? The disciples are even more surprised when Jesus tells them that he means Lazarus is dead! Jesus says, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." Confusing. This is very confusing. Why go now if he has already died? And what does Lazarus' death have to do with their belief? The Jewish people tried to stone Jesus the last time he was there. Why go now? What good would their journey accomplish? Once again, the disciples are surprised and confused by Jesus' behavior, but Thomas encourages them to go, even if it is to their own deaths.

When they arrive in Bethany, the stage is already set for what is to come. Like the disciples, Martha is surprised by Jesus' behavior. Jesus loved Lazarus, and he loves Martha and Mary. Martha comes to Jesus and wants to know why Jesus didn't come sooner. Again we recognize a human being thinking as most of us think, in terms of cause and effect. Martha is grieving, convinced as most human beings would be that her brother's death is forever. Later, her sister Mary wonders the same thing about Jesus' actions. Their brother is dead, and Jesus could

have come sooner. Jesus could have done something to save him! And we wonder..."how is Jesus to be glorified through Lazarus' death and his sisters' grief?

We recall Martha and Mary in other scripture passages. In Luke 10:38-42, Martha is busily preparing a meal while Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to the word of God from Jesus' own lips. Later in John 12, Jesus returns to Bethany to have a special meal with them. Martha serves the meal, Lazarus is at the table, and Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive oil. [The Gospel of John speaks of this Mary, Lazarus' sister, not Mary Magdalene, as the one who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Mary Magdalene is never mentioned in any gospel as the one who anointed Jesus' feet. (Meda Stamper, Commentary in *Working Preacher*)]

Not long ago, a friend of mine attended a women's retreat in which those present were asked to raise their hand if they were more like Martha, or more like Mary. Then they were told to move to one of two groups, either the Martha group or the Mary group. But first, a surprise. If they raised their hand that they were like Martha, they were to go to the Mary group. If they raised their hand that they were like Mary, they were to go to the Martha group. My friend did so, and commented later about how difficult it was to be in the other group. If you are a doer who focuses on taking responsibility for preparing the meal, it is hard to sit still, because you want to provide the best hospitality for your special guest. If you are a disciple who lingers on every word that comes from the mouth of Jesus, it is hard to think of preparing food, or even about the need for food at all! Indeed, these two sisters are very different. Their actions and words are very different. And yet, they both think in similar ways in our gospel passage, today. Why didn't Jesus come sooner and save their brother?

When Martha approaches Jesus, we observe the following: Martha chastises Jesus for not coming sooner, then she suggests that it is not too late, he can ask God for help! Jesus tells her

what will happen, he says, "Your brother will rise again." Martha misunderstands. She takes this as a simple statement of the Jewish understanding that all the faithful will be raised on the last day. But that is not what Jesus means. He is speaking of His glory! He says, "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." Jesus is foreshadowing what he is about to do for Lazarus, and what he is soon to do for all believers. He is foreshadowing his death on the cross, his burial in a tomb, and his resurrection, when the "Son of God will be glorified." He is foreshadowing his atonement for the sins of all humanity. He is foreshadowing the gift of grace and everlasting life for those who believe in him. Martha affirms her belief in Jesus, calling him "the Messiah, the Son of God."

Martha then returns to Mary, and tells her to go to Jesus. The Jewish people who are with her come, as well. These are not the Jewish people who wanted to stone Jesus, but friends of Martha and Mary who have come to console the two sisters. When Mary sees Jesus, she falls at his feet. (How different her response is to Martha's response! Once again, as in all three scripture passages involving Mary, she is at the feet of Jesus. And in two of the passages, she is weeping.) When Jesus sees her weeping, he weeps, too. Jesus shows his compassion for her and the Jewish people with her. In solidarity with them, he acknowledges their loss, and lets them know through his actions, that when they grieve, he grieves also. Many noted how Jesus' actions demonstrated his love for Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, but some questioned why he did not do something earlier. They said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Throughout the Bible we hear of people questioning Jesus. While we too may want to question why Jesus did not go to Lazarus right away, or why he did not do something that we

prayed for and asked him to do, or why he would allow the Coronavirus that kills people to enter the world, the reality is that it is not our place to judge. It is not our place to judge others, and it is certainly not our place to judge or question God! God is the judge, we are not to judge. God's understandings are far beyond our human understandings. God's power is far beyond our human power. God's abilities are far beyond anything that we can comprehend. Our roles are very different. We are called to believe and trust in God; to believe and trust that God knows more than we do, and to believe that God will direct our paths now and forever.

The Jewish people who are present had heard of Jesus' healing of the blind man; a miraculous healing that demonstrated Jesus' glory. But now they are surprised and confused. Why didn't Jesus keep Lazarus from dying? Where is Jesus' power if he could not save his friend, Lazarus?

They go to the tomb, and Jesus asks that the stone be rolled away. Martha objects. Martha is a realist who is worried about the stench, and too consumed with her grief to recall what Jesus had said to her earlier. Jesus reminds her by saying, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Martha is focused on earthly realities, and Jesus is focused on the miracle that is about to happen. Then Jesus prays publicly to God the Father, so that all will hear and understand--

Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.

Jesus calls out with a loud voice, and Lazarus appears, alive and well. It is a miracle. Thanks and glory be to God!

God's glory is seen. But it is not just the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, but reminding Martha, Mary and the crowd, that Jesus and God are one. The one, Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus

acknowledges through prayer that God the Father sent him. Jesus tells Martha, Mary and the crowd that God the Son will be glorified through His actions. God the Holy Spirit, comes into the hearts of those who believe and kindles their faith, so that the one, Triune God, is glorified.

But there is more to this story. It foreshadows what is to come as we continue our Lenten journey walking with Jesus during the 40-days. The people hear that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and they proclaim Jesus' glory as he enters Jerusalem on a donkey to shouts of "Hosanna, Hosanna in the Highest." Jesus prays to God in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus endures the ridicule and mocking of the earthly leaders and the crowds when they believe that Jesus cannot save himself. Jesus cries out from the cross, as he cried out to Lazarus. Jesus proclaims his glory, when others see only his death. Jesus is buried in a tomb like Lazarus, and at the end of three days, Jesus comes into all his glory. Lazarus was raised, Jesus is resurrected, but both recognize God's power. For God's power makes the impossible, possible!

Our journey continues. How will we look at Jesus? Like Martha, like Mary, like the crowd? Will we recognize Jesus' power even in times of grief and despair? Will we acknowledge that with God, all things, all things are possible? Jesus said 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?" To which we can respond like Martha, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Thanks be to God.