

"The Power of Death vs. The Word of Life"
Ezekiel 37:1-14

April 2, 2017

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Throughout the years, we have faced many powerful and frightening enemies. As a nation, the enemies have varied. In World War II, it was Adolph Hitler. In the Cold War, it was the Soviet Union. Today, it is Isis, Al-Qaeda or North Korea. Individually, we each face our own enemies. For the drug addict, the enemy is meth. For the alcoholic, the enemy is alcohol. For the smoker, the enemy is cigarettes (more specifically, nicotine). As bad as all of these corporate and personal enemies are, none of them is our worst enemy. The most powerful, most dangerous, most frightening enemy we have is death.

Why do I say that? Why is death such a powerful enemy? Unlike any other enemy we might face, death always wins. We may win a few of the battles against death – overcome a serious disease, survive an awful car accident, and so on – but death will always – ALWAYS – win the war. Death is undefeated. Death has defeated all who have gone before us – spouses, parents, children, family and friends. Death will eventually defeat you and me. As Christians, we know that this is true and why it is true. The Bible tells us that death is the punishment for sin – the wage we earn for rebelling against the Law of God. Since, as the Bible says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we know all (including ourselves) will die. But you don't have to be a Christian to know that. Although unbelievers may not know or believe the Biblical explanation for death, they, too, know that death always wins and will defeat them, too.

Why is death such a fearful enemy? Death comes to us so unexpectedly and catches us off guard. Even if death is stalking a loved one through a terminal disease, when death finally arrives, we are still shocked by its appearance. The finality of death is also frightening. There is no mulligan to be taken when death confronts us. There is no rematch when death defeats us. Death's victory is always final.

So, what do we do? How do we react to death? We fight hard against this enemy. We hope that, if we just take care of ourselves, eat right, exercise regularly, we can put off death. We use all the medical, nutritional, and scientific resources we have to prevent death from coming. Doctors and scientists are always looking for more and better ways to prevent death's victory. But death still wins.

When we see that we can't defeat death, we try ignoring death and hope it goes away. We don't talk about death. Or, if we do, we call it something else. Instead of saying someone died, we use some generic term like "passing away" or "passing on" or just "passing" as if by not mentioning the word "death", it can't hurt us.

We try to negotiate a peace treaty with death. People try to think of death as their friend, especially when faced with a terminal illness. We assume that death results in no more suffering and causes transportation to some vague "better place". When someone dies, friends and loved ones hardly want to admit that someone has died, opting for a "celebration of life" where death is ignored instead of a funeral.

The truth of the matter is we can't ignore death. We can't make friends with death. We can't avoid death. So, we fear death. Many will not want to admit this fear to anyone, even themselves. But it is a rare person who has never feared death at all. We know it is there and that it is coming for us.

Is anything more powerful than death? Can anything defeat death? Our text for today says, "Yes!" The prophet, Ezekiel, is taken by the Lord to a valley filled with death and devoid of hope. There was no question here about the reality of death. When Jesus raised people from the dead, skeptics could say that He didn't really do it, but they were all hoaxes. Many of those people, like Jairus's daughter or the young man at Nain, had just died before Jesus came to them. Cynics might say they weren't really dead and Jesus didn't really raise them from the dead. Skeptics could say that even Lazarus from our Gospel lesson today, who had been in the tomb for four days, was not really dead but only in a state of suspended animation. After all, if death always wins, then there must be some way to explain these seeming escapes from death.

But in our text, there is no doubt about death and no room for cynicism or skepticism. Ezekiel was not faced with corpses but the disconnected and very dry bones of people who had long been dead. The Lord asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Now if anyone except the Lord had asked this question, it would be laughable. Experience and common sense would say that there is no way that dry bones of long dead people could ever live again! Not wanting to doubt the Lord but also not knowing what to say, Ezekiel punts the question back to the Lord, "O Lord God, you know." After all what sort of power or might could bring life to such ultimate death?

The Lord tells Ezekiel, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

That’s it? Talk to the bones? Speak words over the bones? Yes, but these are no ordinary words. This is the Word of the Lord. And the Word of the Lord has power. It doesn’t simply describe an action. The Word of the Lord causes an action to take place. Ever since the Lord, at creation, had said, “Let there be light” and there was light, His Word makes things happen, even in life and death situations.

No sooner had Ezekiel spoken the Word of the Lord, the bones came together, formed bodies, and flesh came upon the bones. Ezekiel spoke the Word of the Lord again and breath filled the bodies “and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” Death had been defeated. Life had been restored. There is hope. Death is not in charge. God is in charge and He is a God of life.

How does this affect us? We might be as uncomfortable as Ezekiel when we attend a funeral or walk in a cemetery and wonder, “Can these corpses, these bones, live?” Such a thought might seem to be beyond belief, but it’s not. The season of Lent which we are presently in is all about death. Jesus came into this world to take on death in our place and defeat our greatest enemy for us. And Jesus won.

The Son of God began this tall task by taking on human flesh, a happy event which we celebrated at Christmas. But it was a necessary event. To defeat death, He Himself had to die. To die, He had to be human. To be human, He had to be born and become, as He so often put it, the Son of Man. The Word of God says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Jesus began His fight against death with the same powerful word of God that raised dead bones to life for Ezekiel. Jesus clearly promised that He WOULD rise from death to live. He said to His disciples, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” (Luke 8:31-33)

On the cross, Jesus paid the price for sin, experienced the punishment of sin (death and hell), and defeated the power of sin, the power of death, and the power of hell. When He said, “It is finished!”, it truly was. Those things had been accomplished. The enemy, death, had fallen. New life had been won.

The spectacular event which followed three days later, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead to life, was but a confirmation of His victory on the cross. Sin was paid for. Death and hell were defeated. Life had been restored. As St. Paul wrote, “the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus... abolished death and brought life and immortality to light.” (2 Timothy 1:10) You, who have been baptized into Christ, have been joined, not only to His death which gives you the forgiveness of sins, but to His resurrection which guarantees life now, life through death, and life past death in heaven for all eternity.

The Lord’s way of proclaiming this to Ezekiel is every clear and powerful. The people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon. They felt that they were all but dead – their bones dried up, hope lost, and completely cut off from God. But the Lord promises to them, “Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

What the Lord has done for His people then, He will do for His people now through Jesus Christ. He will open your grave. He will raise you from death to life. He will put His Spirit in you and you shall live. He will bring you to the Promised Land of heaven where you shall live forever and ever by His side, never to die again.

Yesterday was a day when people are asked to believe strange and often unbelievable things. If you fall for such stories, the perpetrator of that story will immediately laugh and say, “April Fools!” When you are reading obituaries, attending funerals of beloved family and friends, and approaching death yourself, you might think this story of resurrection and life might be some cruel April Fools joke that just can’t happen. But the Lord God who raised the dry bones to life, raised Lazarus to life, and who Himself was raised to life, will raise you from death to life eternal. That’s no joke! Amen.