

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

Glen Bengson

RCL: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45 LM: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45 or 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45

This week brings us to the tomb of Lazarus, as Jesus responds to his friends' pleas and Martha's and Mary's faith. Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the tomb, a preview of things to come, a threat to those who think they hold the power of life and death, and evidence that God is the one who has the last word. Such a rich story will have many layers of meaning for us today, as it has always had for the Church.

The Lutheran Order for Confession begins, "Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin, and cannot free ourselves." We could just as well say, "in bondage to sin and death," because they are so intimately connected. But the good news is that the bondage is broken by Jesus' power. Jesus directs the dead man's friends, "Unbind him, and let him go" (v. 44). He speaks the same words to us. In Christ, through his death and resurrection, the powers of death are broken, and we are free to live a new life, to offer our lives in service for the sake of Jesus. "Unbind us and let us go" could be the words of Moses to Pharaoh, declaring that the children of God should not be in bondage to any exploitative earthly rule. "Unbind them and let them go" can be the words of advocates of life speaking to the principalities and powers that hold others in the bondage of hunger, homelessness, hopelessness, and oppression.

Sometimes those forces of bondage even work through the façade of religion. I remember a visit to Haiti with the Lutheran Hunger Program. One of our Haitian guides remarked that in Port-au-Prince there were as many storefront churches as there were bars. Both do the same thing, he said: they give people an escape from the reality of their oppression. Jesus does not offer an escape from sin and death, but victory over them. Jesus does not avoid them, but confronts them head on. Death makes him weep in sorrow for the grief and pain and loss it causes. But he does not shrink from the smell of death and calls Lazarus forth into the fresh air of God's presence and power. In Christ we have been freed from the power of death that makes us think only of ourselves to a life we can freely offer for the sake of others. Instead of simply seeking to preserve our own life, we see in Christ the power of life offered up in the service of God.

God's Spirit is the power for such life. The passage from Ezekiel is the familiar vision of the valley of dry bones. God's breath moving over the barren bones rejuvenates them, once more raising them to link and live. It is a parable of God's gracious gift of new life to God's people Israel—and for Christians, to the Church. A powerful example of that Spirit bringing life and hope out of the desert of death was the Jubilee 2000 gathering in Washington in June of 2000. Hundreds were able to gather in support of debt relief for the poorest nations, and therefore the poorest people, of the world. Linking hands, we circled the U.S. Treasury building in a sign of solidarity. It was an invitation to the world's leaders to use their power to help poor nations needing financial resources to feed their hungry, house their homeless, heal their sick, educate their children, and develop their human potential toward self-sufficiency. The Spirit was present,

breathing life and hope where only death seemed to be present. How and where can we continue to link with others and let the Spirit rattle the dry bones back to life?

### *Children's Time*

Think about going outside on a cold morning and blowing your breath, your air, into the cooler air. You can see your breath! That's like the Church. God blows his Spirit into the Church, and the actions of the Church become the sign of that breath of God. We all know we can't stay under water for very long. We need to come up to breathe.

Just as we need air to live, we need the Spirit of God to live our Christian lives. That's one reason it's important for us to be in church and to gather with other Christians as we do today, so that we can share the Spirit, the breath of God, the love of God, with one another and with the world.

### *Musical Suggestions*

Peace, to Soothe Our Bitter Woes—LBW 338 Rise Up, O Saints of God!—LBW 383 (also BP 126) Before You, Lord, We Bow—LBW 401 O Holy Spirit, Enter In—LBW 459 Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling—LBW 523 The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve—WOV 723 Lord, You Give the Great Commission—WOV 756 (also BP 106) I Am the Bread of Life—WOV 702 (also BP 124) Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness—WOV 684 Baptized in Water—WOV 693 We Were Baptized in Christ Jesus—WOV 698 Breathe on Me, Breath of God—BP 88 Spirit of the Living God—BP 102/103 Lord, Make Us Servants of Your Peace—BP 157