BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 5 (A)
March 26, 2023

[RCL] Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Ezekiel 37:1-14
In addition to its inclusion in the fifth Sunday of Lent, this well-known passage also serves as one of the suggested readings for the Great Vigil of Easter. Hearing it, then, may conjure memories of a darkened room, lit only by candlelight, and filled with expectation and the stories of God's mighty works in the lives of our ancestors. This story is full of rich imagery and a theology of partnership between God and the prophet and hope for God's future: a future with real, living bodies. In this passage, we see the two necessary elements for human life: real, living bodies and the life-giving breath of God. It is important to note that the word "breath" in this passage is the Hebrew word *ruach* which can be translated as breath, wind, and spirit. This is the same *ruach* that hovered over the face of the deep in the creation story. It is the same *ruach* that blew all night over the sea so that the Israelites could cross on dry land. And it is the same *ruach* that brings these dry bones to life.

There is another easy-to-miss word that might provide a new layer of meaning to this passage. In verse 9, the mortal is commanded to prophesy to the breath that these "slain" might live. This is the same word used in Genesis to describe Cain's murder of Abel. It does not merely mean dead, or even killed, but killed violently and unjustly: slain. Therefore, this valley of dry bones represents not only mortality and desolation but also the result of war and violence. It is emblematic of human division and brokenness – the very things God undoes in this passage, one bone, one ligament, one breath at a time. The use of the word slain, then, invites us to reflect on how God's mighty power might bring new life to our own experiences of desolation at the hands of sinful realities that harm and destroy the children of God.

- What are some of our own realities of violence and human cruelty that God seeks to undo? Where might we most desire God's resurrection?
- What are some ways we can prepare for the breath of God to enter our lives? Has it entered already?

Psalm 130
Like much of Hebrew poetry, this psalm makes excellent use of parallelisms in its structure and intense, embodied spiritual language in its content (more on this later). Parallelisms in Hebrew poetry exist in every verse, with each half of the verse commenting on or intensifying the content of the other half. Take verse 5 for example: "My soul waits for the Lord." How much does your soul wait for the Lord? "More than watchmen for the morning." The intensity of the psalmist's experience of longing for the Lord is more than those who watch for the dangers of the night to slip away with the new dawn. Parallelism can also go beyond each verse,

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putting multiple verses in parallel to each other. Take verses 5 and 6 for example. Verse 5, as we have seen, gives voice to a personal experience of faith and longing. This is then reflected outwardly in verse 6 with the use of the imperative verb tense, imploring Israel to wait for the Lord in the same way that the psalmist does. The beauty and artistry of Hebrew poetry, then, rests not only in wordplay or rhyme (which it does still have) but in its use of parallelism to expand and intensify its contents in many different directions at once.

As for the content of this psalm, its embodied spirituality may not be readily evident in English. For example, the word *nefesh* (most often translated as "soul" in English translations of the psalms) literally refers to the throat or breath of a living being. This allows us to embody the linguistic and theological world of ancient Hebrew by imagining our very throats, rather than primarily a disembodied spirit, longing for the living God. When encountering psalms and other Hebrew poetry such as Job or the prophetic writings, try to take note of every time a spiritual reality (such as longing for God) is given a physical form (my throat/breath longs for God). This practice can allow us to feel the text in our very bodies, an experience, I believe, its authors were hoping for.

- Is there a part of your body that you most associate with your soul? How does the Hebrew language's direct link between the body and the soul inform us theologically?
- Do you notice any other parallelisms in this psalm? What stands out to you?

Romans 8:6-11

This passage, like many others, has within it the ingredients for misunderstanding when we encounter it in a context almost 2,000 years removed from its original and in a different language. If like me, you were raised in a Christian tradition that took this passage (and those like it) to its logical extreme, you may find yourself uncomfortable, even anxious, when encountering it again. In light of this complexity, it may be helpful to examine three aspects of this scripture.

First, when encountering any scripture, it is important to recognize that they (like all ancient texts) have a rhetorical purpose. That is, they were written in order to convince their readers of something. The costs, both financial and temporal, of writing, copying, and distributing written documents like Paul's letters meant that no space was wasted with content that was not essential (from the writer's perspective). Therefore, if it feels like the writers of a particular scripture are trying to change your mind, it's because they are. Remaining aware of this reality can help us soften in the face of Paul's strong rhetorical language and appreciate what is behind it: his desire that his words might truly impact and improve the lives of his readers.

Second, Paul is using very specific language to describe the reality of sin, language that is explicitly tied to flesh. This has, unfortunately, been used to justify and promote hatred of self and one's body. In this passage, Paul is using the Greek word *sarx,* which refers to flesh and meat in order to describe the reality of human sinfulness. He is not using this word to describe all of God's good creation, the cosmos, which has been redeemed by Christ. Rather, he is using this language in a very limited way.

Third, Paul is also using Greek in a way that points us toward his Jewish heritage. Similar to our reflection on this week's passage from Ezekiel, the word used for "Spirit" in this passage is *pneuma*, which can be translated as breath, wind, and spirit. Like Ezekiel, Paul views this spirit as an animating breath that fills us with new life.

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So, with these three things in mind, we can focus on Paul's message that our own experience of brokenness and weakness is transformed by the very breath of God rushing into our lives. We live in a redeemed cosmos that still retains the lived experience of sin; a sin that is being driven out and transformed by the Spirit of God.

- What was your relationship with this passage before today? Has it changed?
- If you could ask Paul a question, what would you ask?
- If you had to rephrase this passage for a contemporary audience, how might you do it?

John 11:1-45

Given the length of this passage, for this Bible study, we're going to focus primarily on the portion of the text following Jesus' arrival in Bethany in verse 17. Like many familiar stories from scripture, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is powerful, memorable, and full of drama and emotion. For those of us who grew up in communities where memorizing scripture was a high priority, John 11:35 was a common starting point. For many of us, one of the shortest verses in our scriptures packs a hefty theological punch: Jesus began to weep. To enrich our understanding of this story, it would be helpful to place this divine show of emotion in its context: Jewish burial and mourning practices.

A close reading of this text brings to light an anonymous group of supporting characters: the Jews. Elsewhere in John's gospel, this term is used to the unfortunate end of villainizing the Jewish people rather than the specific groups of Jewish leaders that the synoptic gospels take aim at. In this passage, however, the term is used neutrally to describe a group of fellow Jews who have gathered with Mary and Martha to mourn with them. A relatively small detail in verse 31 gives an insight into the character of these fellow mourners: "[They] saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there." These fellow Jews are compassionate, attentive, and ready to go wherever the recipient of their compassionate presence wants to go. It is within this context that Jesus was raised and learned to mourn. Let us imagine the young Jesus learning to mourn in this way with the Jewish community of his upbringing. His weeping in verse 35, then, is as much about his deep, compassionate connection with his community as it is about his own emotional experience. This is a Jesus who has learned to mourn in community and to support those who mourn with his physical presence.

- Does reflecting on the other mourners in this passage change our view of Jesus' mourning? If so, how?
- How does the Jesus shown to us in this passage inform our own relationship with mourning and grief?

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