



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 5 (A)
March 29, 2020

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

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The prophet Ezekiel writes to a community in exile—a community devastated by disconnection from their places and people of origin. Ezekiel describes a site that would seem familiar to his listeners: a valley of dry bones. This image evokes despair through its desolate landscape, which would not have been simply metaphoric to the exiled community, but rather a reference to the remnants of the battlefields of war (cf. *Oxford Bible Commentary*). Moreover, the dry bones represent the holistic nature of the exiled community's impoverishment, which is not only literal-physical but emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Amid this desolation, God asks Ezekiel if the dry bones can live. While the answer to this question seems obvious, Ezekiel's response to the Lord – “O Lord God, you know” – repaints the valley from a site of despair to a place of potential restoration. The ensuing description of God's revitalization of the dry bones through Ezekiel's prophesying power serves to remind both the exilic community and readers today that even the driest of bones (even the most neglected aspects of our emotional, mental, and spiritual selves) will be brought to new life through the “breath”— the Spirit —of God. Moreover, the God who revitalizes the dry bones is the same God who fashioned those bones at their first day; God continually makes new what God has already formed.

- In what areas of life are you or your community experiencing impoverishment these days? What are the sources of the impoverishment?
- How might God be inviting you to prophesy life and breath to those around you who reside in desolation or exile?

Psalm 130

Psalm 130 is one of seven penitential psalms which speak of the emotional and spiritual experience after having sinned. In this psalm, the content of the speaker's sin is ambiguous; rather than overtly naming the wrong which has been done, the speaker simply references his own need for forgiveness (v. 3), mercy (v. 6), and redemption (v. 7). This ambiguity offers an opportunity for broad reflection about both personal and corporate sinfulness. The congregation or study group may be reminded of the inherent brokenness of

humanity and humankind's innate posture of iniquity and invited to do the hard (and good!) work of seeing this brokenness in themselves.

So, too, shall they be reminded of God's steadfast loving-kindness. The Psalmist's turn toward penitence should not be read as a woeful and despairing posture of defeat. Rather, the Psalmist cries to God precisely because he is convicted that God will not leave him to flounder in the depths. Here, too, we might consider more fully the nature of waiting. While patience does not always come easily to those in the throes of despair, waiting here ought best to be understood as a posture of deep hope, born from the belief that God's redemption is nigh.

- For what are you seeking forgiveness, and what are your practices of repentance?
- How might you help yourself and others to inhabit a posture of hope?

Romans 8:6-11

It's hard to avoid Paul's uncompromising nature in this passage. Believers, he seems to say, are on the good side of the line, while unbelievers find themselves on the bad. "Right" behavior in these verses corresponds to a life aligned to the Spirit, while those whose minds are "set on the flesh" will find themselves disconnected from the new life possible in Jesus Christ. Paul here seeks to prompt followers of Christ to orient their whole beings toward the one true God—idolizing anything other than God is the source of real trouble.

As you study this passage, don't be afraid to name this discomfort upfront; doing so offers opportunity to uncover the explicit and implicit metrics your community uses to determine "right" and "appropriate" Christian behavior. Be reminded, though, that God alone opens the path to redemption to God's creation.

- To what do you set your mind? What might create an obstacle between you and the new life of Jesus Christ?

John 11:1-45

John's telling of the story of Lazarus completes his cycle of "sign" stories meant to reveal the miraculous power of Jesus, as well as to describe Jesus' reception among those who witness the signs. This story is the last of the miracle narratives. It accomplishes two goals in John's Gospel. First, the story emphasizes the divinity and generative power of Christ: the resurrection of Lazarus (vv. 38-45). Second, the story serves as a hinge from stories about Jesus' ministry to the longer story leading to Jesus' death and resurrection: Jesus reminds the disciples of his impending death (vv. 7-13).

In a story that so significantly emphasizes Jesus' divinity (resurrection truly is a God-given miracle), one should not miss the way that John depicts Jesus' interactions with his friends in this narrative. As all humans do when a beloved friend dies, Jesus mourns the death of Lazarus (vv. 28-37) and seeks to comfort both his disciples and Mary and Martha. These emotions open a path for discussion about when, why, and how God grieves with and longs for the life and joy of God's people. Moreover, we are reminded

that God possesses the power to vanquish whatever form death takes in our lives. As beloved friends of God, we experience fully this life-giving power, even in unexpected and surprising ways.

- How does Jesus interact with you in your life?
- Mary and Martha respond to Jesus in contrasting ways in this story: Martha with quiet conviction in Jesus' power, and Mary out of grief at the loss of her brother. Rather than opposing one another, these reactions often coexist in times of grief. What stories from your own life echo these emotional responses?

The Rev. Cate Anthony is a third-year Master of Divinity candidate at Yale Divinity School and is a transitional deacon in The Episcopal Church, ordained in the Diocese of Chicago. She grew up in Delaware and moved to New Haven after spending three years in Chicago, where she worked as a hospital chaplain. Following graduation and ordination, Cate hopes to start a ministry focused on reconciliation and restoration work, gathering disparate communities around a shared table. In her spare time, Cate is an aspiring master chef and soft-serve ice cream enthusiast.