

5th Sunday of Lent

Every day I make time to celebrate mass, say other prayers, hear confessions, and work on homilies. I visit with people who are preparing for marriage, planning a funeral, or seeking spiritual counsel. I return phone calls, respond to emails, and keep up on social media. I read the news. I play music, go to concerts, listen to the Royals, and exercise. I write books and articles, and I prepare lectures. I have plenty to do. But on days when I have very few appointments on my calendar, I don't use my time well. I take a long time to do short tasks. Usually I work hard, but not always. I get lazy. Maybe you do too.

Each year on Ash Wednesday we come into church determined to renew our lives. We confess our sins. We receive the ashes of penitence. We promise God that we will do penances for six weeks. We start Lent well. Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Lent is not done with us yet, but some of us are done with Lent. We got lazy. We have not kept our resolutions. We have fallen back into sin. Lent can inspire us to lead a better life, and if we keep up with its demands for six full weeks, it has the power to change our habits and draw us closer to Christ.

Today's first reading presents the final verses of a longer, startling passage in the Book of Ezekiel. The hand of God has moved the prophet in the spirit into the center of a broad valley filled with human bones. The spirit of God made Ezekiel walk among the bones to see how many there were, and how dry they were. God asks, "Can these bones come back to life?" Ezekiel answers, "You alone know that." Then God speaks to the bones: "Listen! I will make breath enter you so that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put breath into you so you may come to life. Then you shall know that I am the LORD." As Ezekiel conveyed this message, he heard a noise like thunder as the bones came rattling together, sinews appeared on them, flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But they had no breath. God told Ezekiel to command the wind to enter into them. He did, and it did. The once-dry bones now became a vast living army. That is where today's first reading begins. God tells Ezekiel that Israel has been lazy. Israel is like dry bones. But God says to Israel, "I am going to open your graves.... I will put my spirit in you that you may come to life."

We hear this prophecy on the day that we hear about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the last great miracle of John's gospel before the resurrection. God has power over life and death. God raised Jesus after he died; God can raise us to life after we die. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, and the spirit of God raised lazy Israel to life.

My brothers and sisters, the same is true of us. On the Fifth Sunday of Lent we may be more aware of our sins and failures than we were on Ash Wednesday. If we have failed this Lent, we may feel as though we are nothing but dry bones, disconnected from the person we want to be. But God has a spirit, and God can blow that spirit into our bodies. We cannot do it alone, but God can make us new again. We each have a purpose. We are alive for a reason. Let us enter these final weeks of Lent feeling the breath of God within us, calling us to be faithful to our promises and bringing life to these lazy bones.

Sunday, April 2, 2017