

“Know that I am the Lord”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

We live in a world where everything is subject to brokenness. Things change and fall apart; friends betray one another; those we would hold onto forever slip through our fingers no matter how much we will them to stay. In Lent, we are led to look at the world – to look at ourselves – with clear eyes. We cannot pretend not to see the pain, heartache, and tragedy all around.

For Ezekiel, this tragedy was on a national scale. Ezekiel was born around 623 BC into a priestly family. Though the nation of Judah was a subject of Assyria, they had worked out a mutually prosperous arrangement where Judah controlled the olive industry. When Ezekiel was in his teens, he saw sweeping religious revival and reform under King Josiah – a great hope to the nation. The Assyrian empire had significantly weakened, which gave the people of Judah more flexibility and independence. But after King Josiah was killed in 609 and the Assyrian empire crumbled, Egyptians and Babylonians fought for control of the land of Israel. The new king offered tribute to the Babylonians and even gave them some members of the royal family as hostages to preserve the holy city. The people fought against the Babylonians – an 18 month siege to defend Jerusalem – but to no avail. The people were starving and many innocent were slain – old and young, male and female. Judah was ultimately taken over by the Babylonian empire. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, ransacking its precious goods. The Babylonians exercised dominance and control over the people of Israel with mass casualties and exile from their homeland. In 597, Ezekiel went into captivity and exile with many Judeans to keep the word of G-d alive in their midst.

Ezekiel is prophet to a people who are lost and who have lost much – almost everything. He must prophesy to a people who are barely hanging on. Being caught up in the Lord’s power, Ezekiel is taken to a valley of dry bones – countless people long since dead. And the Lord asks him, “mortal, can these bones live again?” This question is a challenge; maybe it’s a rhetorical question. From our reason, we would say, “no, bones don’t live again.” From our experience and frustration and uncertainty about justice coming to pass or things working out right, we would say, “that’s just not how it works.” Ezekiel says, “Lod G-d, only you know.”

In the Gospel lesson, Mary and Martha aren’t coping with a national tragedy. Their worries are personal, intimate. They are scared for their brother Lazarus. His illness is more than they can tend to – a danger to their fragile family. And Jesus is so close to them all that when they send a message to him, all it says is, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” – they don’t even need to say his name: Lazarus. The name Lazarus means, “G-d is my help” and the sisters cry out to Jesus. “Jesus, be our help. Come to our aid.” Shockingly, Jesus gets their message and stays where he is for two days longer. The sisters’ message was urgent, touched with desperation, and Jesus didn’t come. In fact, Jesus doesn’t even start his journey to Bethany until he knows that Lazarus has died. Martha won’t wait for him to show up at her door. In her grief and confusion – maybe anger, too – she marches out to meet him on his way and says words all too familiar to each of us who grieve: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus comes to the house, Mary confronts him, too. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And Jesus wept together with her.

“Mortal, can these bones live again?” and Ezekiel answers, “Lord G-d, only you know.” Jesus tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. Do you believe

this?” Martha says, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of G-d, the one coming into the world.”

When nations are destroyed, when generations are wiped out, when loved ones get sick and die – where is G-d? Why doesn't G-d step in and do something? Is the Lord's hand too short to save? Does G-d intervene in our world? When things go wrong for so long – even if one thing goes wrong enough – it can feel like G-d must be either powerless or uncaring. We want grand gestures for ourselves, miracles on demand, and if we don't get them, sometimes we don't know what to do with G-d. If we know evil to be so powerful, how powerful is G-d, really?

In the Old Testament, there is a phrase that recurs about 80 times. It's in Exodus 9 times, but it is like a refrain in the book of Ezekiel – 62 times! It is some variation of this: “You will know that I am the Lord, when...” These passages each deal with catastrophes, despair, and doubt with a powerful message about who G-d is. When the people languish under Egyptian bondage, Exodus 6:7 says, “I will take you as my people, and I will be your G-d. You shall know that I am the Lord your G-d, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.” Earlier in Ezekiel 34:27, we hear this prophecy from G-d, “They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them.”

But, perhaps, no passage includes a statement so striking about the power of the Lord as the one from Ezekiel 37, “The Lord G-d proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am that Lord. I have spoken and I will act, says the Lord.”

A valley of bones could never live again. A man who died of an illness is beyond our power. But do we know the power of the Lord? Do we dare dream of the miracles and wonders that G-d weaves into the fabric of our existence? Can we stand in the face of the logic of despair and say, “all things are possible with G-d”? The One who formed us from the clay, the one who first breathed life into us and picked us up from the dirt – this One makes a way when there is no way. This One works and we do not always see it. This One works things for good, for justice, for consummation in the kingdom of heaven come to earth.

When we face the darkness and danger it is good to tremble and even to grieve, but we must fight despair. As Jesus wept with Mary and Martha, someone asked, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” “Mortal, can these bones live again?” “Do you believe [in the resurrection]?” Jesus says, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of G-d?” Our simplest confession of faith – since the beginning of the church – is this: “Jesus is Lord.” And raising Lazarus from the dead is perhaps the most profound demonstration that Jesus gave to all those present that he is the Lord. Many can heal, many can teach, even minor miracles could be explained away, but only G-d can resurrect. Only G-d can place the breath on our lips and spark us to life.

G-d’s power moves through our world. Back in December 2010, I made my first visit to Louisville Seminary to see if that’s where G-d was calling me to study. I was skeptical about moving to Kentucky, but I had a wonderful experience meeting professors and students, attending worship and asking questions. But the morning I was to drive the 8 hours back to North Carolina, it had started to snow. Now, I grew up near the beach in Virginia. It snows even less there than it does here. By that I mean that they used to cancel school when it forecasted snow – no actual flakes, mind you, just a forecast! This had left me rather unprepared as a winter

weather driver. But, looking out at the fluffy flakes coming down, I figured that they took better care of the roads in Kentucky than they did back home. And I figured that I had 8 hours to go so I had best get in gear. I ignored my nerves, I turned up the music, and I drove 60 down the highway in the left lane.

About a half hour east of Louisville, my car started to skid. It all happened so fast, but everything slowed way down in my head and my thoughts were swimming. The car is spinning. I'm driving too fast. I'll probably hit the rail or some other cars. It's all my fault. I hope I don't hurt anyone else. But my prayer in that moment startled me as much as anything else – like the Spirit was praying for me, “Lord, I made a mistake and I might get badly injured or die. That's okay. If you want me – if this is all that you had for me to do – I will come back to you.” Then time flowed normally again. I ended up facing the wrong way in the same left-hand lane that I had been driving in. But the person in the car behind me saw me and slowed down to a skid-free stop a few feet from my bumper. And she looked at me and I looked at her. Somehow, everything and everyone was okay. My engine had stalled so I turned the car back on. I pulled over to the shoulder and sat there in shock for about 60 seconds before I realized that if I stayed there any longer than that, I would lose my nerve and not make it home. I kept on driving (very slowly) and got home safe and sound – about 11 hours later. That moment was impossible, but G-d let me live, unscratched. The power of G-d came from nowhere and it made it possible for me to be where I am today. I couldn't ask for it; I couldn't expect it, but G-d provided it and by doing that, issued a challenge not to underestimate how G-d works in our world.

As we follow Christ, as we affirm him as Lord and Savior, we know that we are not always spared injury and heartache. We know that the world is still plagued by evil. But we also know that in Christ, we will live again. We will be whole again. We will be restored to one

another. We will rest in heavenly peace. If the valley of dry bones can come alive, if Lazarus who is decaying can wake and walk once more, if G-d has brought us safe thus far, we can trust G-d to let amazing things flourish. We can make our lives an offering of love and service, trusting that G-d will water the seeds that we plant and transform them into places of shade and sustenance for many more to follow. Despair claims that evil has the final word. Hope proclaims that the final word belongs to Christ and he's not done with us yet. Amen.