

Living Death

Living Death...those are not two concepts that we use together very often. Most of the time we consider them mutually exclusive...yet physical life, emotional life and spiritual life each have their own place within us. And the health status for each need to be well for us to have what our scriptures refer to as life abundant. Whenever we look around our world we often find images that cause us to despair, like the image presented in the vision Ezekiel saw in the valley of the dry bones. We, like the psalmist who wrote Psalm 130 often call out to God from the depths. The vision Ezekiel 37 records is a powerful image, one made real for us today by the ravages that have come with the ethnic wars present in our world...visiting a Holocaust museum is no longer the only place where evidence of these things can be found. The context of Ezekiel's vision is found within his nation's history. Ezekiel, a member of the priestly clan has been taken to Babylon after suffering through a couple of years being under siege in Jerusalem before the city is conquered and left in ruins accompanied by the destruction of the Temple itself. All the things that mattered to him and his people have been destroyed and they have even been taken from the land God promised to their ancestors. The fate of Judea now seems to resemble that of the northern kingdom of Israel which had been totally destroyed over a hundred years before. This represented not only a political disaster but also a crisis of faith as many assumed that not only their army had been defeated by a stronger nation but their God had been defeated by a stronger deity as well. The people were wondering if the Lord was truly Lord and truly faithful to the promises made to them which gave them the land. Ezekiel had spent the previous year's warning them their behavior was angering God; this was the result but despite their failures to keep the covenant, they felt God had abandoned them. This is the situation when God shows up to "take Ezekiel by the hand." He is taken out into middle of a valley by God's spirit and shown a gruesome sight, the valley was full of dry bones. Looking at this sight, God asks him a question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel was wise enough not to give the logical response of no. Instead he answered, O Lord God, you know. God asks him to then prophesy to those bones in the name of the Lord telling them that God will restore them. Ezekiel prophesied as God has asked and the bones came together, began to have muscles and flesh attached and be covered with skin. But things seemed to come to an end at that point because there was no evidence of life within them. But God wasn't finished. He told Ezekiel to prophesy to the winds to come and God would then breathe life into them. God finishes the vision with an explanation to make sure Ezekiel would understand the message he was to bring to the exiles: "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" Throughout scriptures God has the prophets bring messages of judgment, calls to repentance, and admonitions to obedience. Now with the people despairing, God sends them a message with good news, God tells them: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil." God promises they will be brought back from exile. The repetition within the text drums the point of the message into us: God's spirit is the key. With God's spirit, anything is possible. Without it, existence is just flesh and blood. But with God's spirit, there is life—and what Jesus called the fullness of life. And there is no place on earth, no when in time, and no thing in sin or situation, that can keep God's spirit away from God's people. This text was probably chosen as one fitting for the nearness of the end of our Lenten journey. Next Sunday begins what is

termed Holy Week and the final acts of obedience of Jesus to God's plan. Because of that this Hebrew Scripture is often seen as being about the resurrection of Jesus. Yet it is not. Their understanding of death was that all the dead resided in Sheol together until God's final judgment and the world ended. There was no division into separate waiting rooms known as heaven and hell. That understanding came much later in history. The vision which Ezekiel sees is about the restoration of the nation, not about resurrection. Our gospel reading from John which describes the final act that Jesus performed which sealed his fate with the religious authorities. Jesus receives a message from a disciple who appears in the gospels when Jesus spends some time in their home. The message is that her brother has become seriously ill. Their home is in Bethany, a village we would term a suburb of Jerusalem. When he receives this message he does not immediately set out for Bethany, and when he tells his disciples that Lazarus is ill and he is going to Bethany, they remind Jesus that the religious authorities had tried to have him stoned the last time, so probably placing himself within their reach is not a good idea. His response is to tell them he must go no matter the risk. It interesting that one disciple, Thomas the Twin who is known more widely as Doubting Thomas states he will go along so that he may die with Jesus. Jesus tells them he knows that Lazarus has already died, but what his death will cause is necessary. It is necessary because it will be the triggering event for the religious authorities to move quickly forward with their plan to bring about Jesus' death the event which will bring about the revealing of God's glory through the cross of Jesus' suffering, the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption for the world. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been entombed for four days with a stone blocking the grotto entrance. Jesus arrives to find Mary and Martha grieving, helpless and hopeless at Lazarus' death. They had a nagging question as well which added insult to their injury. Mary had asked Jesus for help early. A crying Martha greets Jesus saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary said the same thing. 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 believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha proclaims her belief that Jesus is the Messiah so when Jesus informs her that her brother will rise again she states she know that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. But we often overlook the complete statement that Jesus has made. "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus' response separates resurrection and life into two categories, he's making a point we often overlook; not just saying the same thing in two ways. Jesus goes with Mary and Martha to the tomb. Upon arrival there we have the shortest verse in scripture: Jesus wept. In that act Jesus reveals one of the most important characteristics we can ever learn about the heart of God. When Jesus experienced the sisters Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother Lazarus and their distraught neighbors, John writes Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The God whom we worship is not a remote and aloof "sky god" somewhere way out there. No. He is a tender God who is deeply moved, even grieved, by anything and everything that threatens our human well-being. This compassionate and empathetic nature of God is the reason why the Scriptures encourage us to bring to Him every anguish, confusion, anger perplexity and anxiety. Despite being warned about the stench which will come, Jesus asks that the stone be taken away. When it is removed Jesus begins by offering up thanks to God for being heard, then he cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" John's description is dramatic: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." Jesus tells

those around him to remove the bindings and let him go. This demonstration of power increased greatly the number who believed in Jesus, increasing the fears of the Jewish authority. We also know God hears our concerns. We know God loves us and not only empathizes with our many pains and sorrows; he does act. Of course our human experience lets us know that God doesn't act exactly when, where, and how we think God should intervene. So we must wait in hope. Part of our maturing as Christians involves learning to wait. We ought to be confident not so much about our chances of a rosy outcome, or about exactly where, when and how God will act, but confident that God will act. We wait in hope even while we "cry out of the depths" to God. When Jesus tells Mary her brother will rise again she hears the promise of a future resurrection. And Jesus seems to offer a correction to this misunderstanding with his declaration about being the resurrection and the life. We tend to hear this statement the same way with our focus on the resurrection we place for ourselves as a distant promise, our guarantee of salvation, our eternal life with God and Jesus in heaven. But what it may mean for us what it meant for Lazarus: but true life right now, right here, with Jesus. The raising of Lazarus also gives him new life with Jesus sharing food and fellowship. New life in Jesus is here and now, because for the gospel of John, it is not just the death of Jesus but the life of Jesus that brings about salvation. Jesus restores Lazarus to life as God restored the exiles to their homeland. That is the underlying connection for these two texts for us. In John's gospel the first disciples are called by an invitation from Jesus to "Come and See." They accept the invitation and their lives are forever changed by what they see. John's message to us is for us to "Come and See" so that our lives can be changed, so we can be rescued from merely existing into living in close relationship with our Lord; restored to living abundantly in the light Christ brings now; here; not in some distant and far off time and place. The invitation is to an abundant life here amid all the struggles of this life within the love which God offers. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.