

UCCNB  
Mary Kay Sauter's sermon  
March 29, 2020  
LENT 5-1  
John 11:1-44

In this morning's texts we are challenged to look at life—to live—new life—which means to be transformed. I suggest that if we don't want to be challenged by the love of God—challenged to live life to the fullest for God—challenged to be changed to be transformed especially in this unique time in our history we shouldn't listen to these texts, because these texts are about that challenge.

Ezekiel was a prophet and a priest to the people of Israel while they were in exile—in the late 500 BCEs. The Babylonians had defeated the people of Judah and had driven the leaders and many of the people into exile in Babylon. Part of Ezekiel's responsibility, his ministry was to assure his hearers of the abiding presence of God among them. In his writings he continually emphasized God's role in the events of the day. His writings and some of his actions are considered rather weird, but he lived his life to the fullest.

In today's text he is clear when God asks him if the bones could live again. He tells God, only God can answer that, if they are to live it will be up to God. God through Ezekiel is clear, the bones, the dried bones are the people who live without hope. The people who live in fear and despair. It is through the people's trust and their faith in God that they have hope and are therefore freed from fear and despair. Ezekiel and his people lived in very difficult times.

We live in difficult times. Besides all the usual divisiveness, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, religion, politics, economics, ideology, cultures. Liberal-Conservative; Christian-Muslim; Christian-Jew; Jew-Muslim; Democracy-Dictatorships; Capitalism-Socialism; the powerful and the disempowered. Added to this we have the Covid-19 disaster. With previous plagues the world had the plus and minus of not knowing what was going on in other parts of the world—today we know immediately. Yes, it adds to our knowledge and

ability to diminish the disaster, but it is also despairing to know how many have contracted the disease and how many have died. I imagine that people throughout all time have lived with a struggle between hope and despair, between hope and fear. And despair and fear often seem to be win over hope. The dry bones of hopelessness, despair and fear are all around us. Where do we find life?

For the people of Ezekiel's time, for us today and for people throughout time it is found in our relationship with God. Unfortunately, some theology is fear-based. Karen Armstrong, well-known modern-day theologian who writes about all the major religions, says that fundamentalism in any religion is fear based. When we fear our own world, when we live in fear, we want control and we are willing to listen to answers that give us control—just believe this about God and all will be well. We dummy God down to a few beliefs so that God becomes smaller and therefore under control. When God is believed to be judgmental, needing sacrifices and needing us to suffer to teach us lessons then making God smaller seems to be a healthy response—as would leaving the relationship altogether which many people have done by leaving the church. I saw a man interviewed who said the virus was God's doing and we needed to trust God to take care of it—that we didn't need to do any distancing or staying home—just let God take care of it. God doesn't control us—God works through us for the best possible—it is our choice to do that which brings new life to others.

How do we step out of the fear and despair? How do we grow in our own faith so that we choose life and live life with hope? Our hope is found in Ezekiel and his belief that God can take the dry bones of any group of people and make them living, thriving entities. Whether it is within churches, communities, nations, with our help God can take hopeless, divided, fearful, despairing people and transform them into something new, something life-giving. It is

through our faith and trust in God, and our openness and willingness to be transformed that this takes place.

I would've done what Martha did if my brother was sick—get a message to someone I trust—someone I believe could help him. In that day it was often the rabbis who were the healers so Jesus would have been a natural for them to call. In addition, Martha and her family had a close relationship with Jesus—they trusted him and knew that Jesus loved them. By the time Jesus arrived—he had gotten tied up for a couple days—Lazarus had died. The texts suggest that Jesus stayed away so that a bigger story could unfold—so that Lazarus would die, and Jesus could prove a point. Another view is that the author was writing to prove a point within the religious community of that day. That's what I believe.

Both sisters believed that if Jesus had gotten there in time Lazarus would have been healed. Martha goes on to say that she still believes that the relationship between Jesus and God is special and unique and she trusts that relationship to bring about new life. Martha, even in the face of her brother's death, still trusts Jesus to make God's gifts of healing available.

There follows a conversation about resurrection—some of the Jews believed in the resurrection—in a judgement time and then resurrection at the end times. Martha believes that's what Jesus is talking about and agrees with him and he responds by saying—no I am talking about resurrection now—in this lifetime—that living faithfully is what's important. Through an understanding of who Jesus is we understand that death loses its power and life gains new power if we live the way Jesus showed us how.

Mary joins Martha and Jesus along with others who are weeping, and Jesus feels their pain—he cries—cries over his own loss of a loved one and over their loss. Martha questions opening the tomb—it will be smelly—but Martha's dilemma is at the heart of all believers: Can we let go of the limits that we place on what is possible in order to embrace the limitless possibilities offered by God?

Especially as we follow Jesus who used the power of God's healing love for life—not for death. Martha and Mary model how we are to live as we struggle to free ourselves from the power of death that defines and limits us and move to embrace the promises and possibilities of life available as we live our faith trusting in the power of God's healing love.

Last week I talked about grieving—the steps, denial, anger, depression and acceptance. I emoted—I still want a hair cut and mostly I miss my family. Let me be clear—I am not a therapist, or a psychiatrist. I am a pastor. Our policy is that if we meet with someone for three or four times and things aren't better our responsibility is to refer the person to a counseling professional. I am also aware that there is a huge difference between a clinical diagnosis of depression and the kind of depression I can address. If you have deeper depression issues, please see a professional. For others, take walks, read books, stay in touch with loved ones, do good deeds, enjoy stories about folks reaching out to others, reach out yourself, tell jokes, laugh and encourage others to laugh, watch movies—happy movies—Sing in the Rain---do what you love—quilt, cook, paint, sing—whatever you love to do. Try something new. And all those boxes you've been meaning to go through—now would be a good time. Acknowledge that you are sad, that you miss people, that you want to be happy.

This is the fifth Sunday in Lent—the last Sunday before Holy Week. These texts have been selected because they are about our choice of new life, about resurrection. They give us hope as we enter, as we prepare for Holy Week. The bones will be made whole, with flesh and sinews and muscles and they'll dance. Those who are filled with hopelessness and despair—those who are dead to the world will be raised. We'll live, we'll be transformed, we'll change and in the process we'll help God help others live, be transformed and changed. When we live with God as the center of our lives there is hope. When we are open to the wisdom, love and compassion of God and we share it, there is hope. There is hope.