

Understanding Salvation Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45 Lent 5/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 4/2/17

Have you been saved? This is a question I have been asked on an occasion, usually from a zealous follower of Jesus. I am sometimes tempted to respond to that question with, "Saved from what?" Salvation comes from the Latin word *salvus*, which means to heal, to be well, or to be safe. So whenever we speak about salvation, we need to ask four questions: 1) What exactly is salvation? 2) What do we need to be saved from? 3) How does salvation actually happen? 4) Do I really want to be saved? "Understanding Salvation" is the subject of today's sermon.

During the summer (before I went off to college), I had a job as waterfront director at Camp Wilmot, a Presbyterian camp in New Hampshire. One day while life guarding at the water front, I heard a scream. A toddler had slipped into the water. The parents froze as they watched their child sink to bottom. I grabbed the child out quickly and handed her over to her parents. They thanked me for "saving their child." A few years later as a young nurse on her very first day of work, I walked onto the surgical ward where I had been assigned. The play lady came running out of a room into the corridor yelling for a nurse. I hurried into the room and saw a teenage girl who had stopped breathing. Immediately, I began resuscitating her with an ambu bag until the crash cart arrived. Within a few minutes, "she was saved" by the medical team and resumed her life.

From a medical point of view, salvation means to be alive and physically well. From a psychological point of view, salvation means to be integrated and relieved of psychic pain. From a sociological point of view, salvation means that society is able to provide for its citizens by developing structures that ensure basic human rights and wellbeing. From an ecological point of view, salvation means that the physical environment is cared for as well as the other creatures who inhabit mother earth. From an economic point of view, salvation means that there is enough money and resources for a decent life.

So where does salvation fit into the scheme of things from a religious point of view? How does Jesus save us and how does that differ from ego development? The easiest way I can explain this is my personal experience in trying to lose 12 pounds. When I was living in Cupertino, I decided to take advantage of the athletic facilities at DeAnza College in order to lose the weight. But before I could use these facilities, I had to take an introductory physical education course.

This was a 10 week series of lectures and readings where we learned about the benefits of cardio-vascular exercise and weight training. There was a big emphasis on nutrition which included identifying healthy food choices, calorie requirements, and food groups. I already knew this information, and in fact, could have written the chapter myself. However, even though I had the knowledge on how to eat properly, this knowledge did not save me from gaining weight nor did it help me lose my 12 pounds. While knowledge is helpful, it does not save us. If it did, we would not continue to engage in world wars or seek violence as a first response to stopping violence.

For me, I knew how to eat correctly but the cravings in my body would often win out and before I knew it, a donut or two would be down the hatch! It is this domination by our passions and cravings that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

While ego strength and knowledge are important in our journey towards wholeness, we require something more powerful to save us which Christians call *grace*. While disciplined works do help, we also need the power and spirit of God to become truly whole and healthy children of God, made in God's image. The process of salvation includes being transformed into the people that God created us to be through grace. Salvation involves healing from the conditions of fear, anger, hate, ignorance, self-absorption, revenge, alienation, and the propensity to choose the bad, all of which cause

tremendous suffering in our world today. We know we are saved when we have put on the mind of Christ, creating a society where compassion, justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being becomes a living reality. However, unless the whole creation is saved, then none of us can truly experience salvation in isolation. Salvation is effective, primarily as a global event, not a personal one.

So what do we need to do to be saved? First, we need to have the desire. We need to become aware of the gap between the joyful, precious, and compassionate people that God created us to be, and our broken selves. The desire to be healed and be made whole is the first step in the process of salvation. The second step is to know what path to follow. This is where knowledge becomes helpful.

For instance, if you want to be saved from drowning in a pool of water, then you need to learn how to swim. If you want to be saved from sin, ignorance, and healed of those wounds that keep you struggling from being a shining light in the world, then you need to walk the path that Jesus walked—the path that leads to God. This is a spiritual path that requires us to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, motivating us to choose a life where forgiveness, compassion, and generosity become the operating principles. This is a religious experience where the grace of God fills our minds and bodies with the ability to say *no* to the darkness and *yes* to the light. Those who participate in 12 step programs know this path well, always mindful of relying on God’s grace to bring them through another day of sobriety.

As we continue on our Lenten journey, today’s biblical readings take us to the Valley of dry bones and the tomb of Lazarus. These are both stories of resurrection where God breathes God’s spirit into seemingly impossible situations. The prophet Ezekiel looks over the desert where thousands of dead bodies have decomposed after the Babylonian invasion some 2600 years ago, leaving dry bones and a depressed generation of refugees who have lost all hope in returning to the land of Israel. In this vivid vision, dry bones are knit back together and infused with life-giving breath while in the gospel of John, Lazarus is brought back to life after four days in the tomb. In neither case is resurrected life necessarily pretty, nor is it a return to the old ways of living. Something new has happened but it will not erase the pain and agony of the past.

In the Valley of Dry Bones, breathing becomes a metaphor for the divine presence. The themes are renewal, resuscitation, restoration, rejuvenation and resurrection. Ezekiel’s vision is given to a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of their own inner spirit, a living death caused by being in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword and young men and women either killed or exiled. Ezekiel speaks to the brokenness of these people of Israel, souls that have gradually withered and died, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. And so God asks in the vision: “Can these bones live?” And the answer is *absolutely yes* as God breathes new life into dead places.

And so the question for today is this: What are the dry bones in your life that need God’s breath? What is causing you to fear or to sink into hopelessness and despair? Is it the massive graveyards of dry bones in Syria, Mosel, Afghanistan, and Southern Sudan? Are your dry bones aching for the victims of gang slayings, drug wars, poverty, and homelessness? Are the dry bones in your life the aftermath of physical deterioration, mental illness, unforgiven resentments, a disappointed marriage, a lost child, the death of a love one, or the struggle to overcome addiction?

Today we hear a promise that only God can offer. In a detailed vision, God instructs the prophet Ezekiel to speak to the dry bones saying: “Thus says the Lord God: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” This breath of God is the spirit of God, the life-giving *ruach* that swept over the waters at the beginning of creation. It is this breath that moves forth in the Lazarus story unbinding him and setting him free. It is this breath of God that propelled Jesus forward from the cross on Good Friday to a resurrected presence on Easter Day. It is this breath, the breath of God that was breathed into Jesus at the time of his baptism and continues to heal us today from our own struggle to remain afloat in the midst of loss and grief and disappointment. It is this breath that saves us by resurrecting our dry bones to a new life. Do you want to be saved? Can these dry bones live? My answer is *yes!* “Breathe on me breath of God. Fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love and do what thou wouldst do.” (hymn # 508)