

Fifth Sunday of Lent – March 29, 2020  
First Presbyterian Church of Perrysburg  
Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Valley of the Dry Bones); John 11:1-44 (Raising of Lazarus)

Guided Scripture reading and devotion  
Rev. Margaret O. Fox

The scripture passages for this Sunday are two challenging, complex texts—you may find things in them that are disturbing, upsetting, comforting, and uplifting. At first, I was concerned that these texts might be too high-octane for the moment we find ourselves in. But at the same time, this is just such a moment to engage the most potent and powerful stories we have available in our tradition—stories of life, death, and resurrection—stories of profound grief and profound hope. I hope you will engage this mystery today, choosing one or the other of these texts.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – The Valley of Dry Bones. Like much of Israel’s scripture, this text emerges from a place of exile. The book of the prophet Ezekiel opens with the prophet’s visions of a traumatic national event: the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem, and the departure of God’s glory from the holy city. The prophet speaks of and to a people in exile. The Valley of Dry Bones represents a turning point, God’s promise to create new life for the nation, a promise of return.

John 11:1-44. Theologically, this story is challenging. It would be easy to read this text and think, Jesus let Lazarus die in order to showcase God’s power—human suffering exists to manifest God’s glory—and from there either to be falsely comforted that you’ve understood the meaning of the present pandemic, or become outraged that scripture would suggest such a thing and reject the story altogether. Both reactions are natural—allow yourself to have them. But I’d encourage you to let yourself go deeper—to question easy answers, to struggle with the things that disturb you. Encounter this text not just with your mind, but with your body and your heart.

#### Gather

Prepare your body, mind, and heart for worship. Go to the space you’ve prepared, light a candle if you’re using one. Sit quietly and let your mind relax. Notice the worries you’re carrying with you, and ask God to hold them for you.

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.” -- Ps. 130:5-6

#### Listen

Choose one of the two scripture passages.

Read the scripture slowly, out loud if possible. You may have strong reactions. Notice these, but do your best to suspend judgment for now. Allow yourself to begin with your imagination. Read the scripture again, allowing your imagination to enter the scene. Close your eyes and sit for several moments. Notice what moments in the story your mind is drawn to. Return to those parts of the story and examine them again.

Reflect on one or more of the questions below. You may want to write out your thoughts, simply ponder them, or get up and pace around (as I did when I was writing them).

What is disturbing in this text? What makes you angry, unsettled, or afraid?  
What is comforting in this text? What brings you consolation, comfort, or hope?

What is disturbing in the world right now? What makes you angry, unsettled, or afraid?  
What is comforting in the world? What brings you consolation, comfort, or hope?

How do you imagine Ezekiel feels in the Valley of Dry Bones as he receives God's commands? –or – What does John tell us that Jesus feels at various points in the story?  
How do you feel in reading it?

Pandemic is an encounter with death in a very real, very literal sense. But many other things die in a pandemic, too: civic life, community interaction, economic activity, public trust. Where are you experiencing death?

It's hard, this side of a pandemic, to imagine what life might be after—just as it's hard, this side of Good Friday, to imagine how Easter might feel. Where/how do you see signs of hopefulness, in this story and in the world? What might resurrection mean?

#### Respond

Direct your heart and mind to God. What would you say to God now? Quiet your mind and listen. Relax your body. If you've been up and walking, return to your seat. If you've been hunched over your Bible, straighten up and sit back in your chair. Slow down, and let yourself take time.

Rest your feet on the floor.

Let your shoulders fall back; open your chest.

Let your forehead relax—your eyes and cheeks and jaw.

Relax and let yourself breathe.

Open your hands, palms facing upward. Let your fingers relax.

Close your eyes and listen to the sounds around you.

Become aware of what is in your heart.

Take whatever is in your heart and offer that to God.

#### Be Sent

Take your hands and place them on your heart.

Let yourself receive whatever gift God has offered you.

Then open your hands back out, palms up, and look at them—these hands you've washed so frequently and been so careful with these past few weeks.

May you know them to be blessed.

And may they bear God's blessing into the world today.