

Pr. Jill Henning – March 29, 2020 – 5th Sunday in Lent, Year A

I don't know about you but our current situation can easily become overwhelming. I wake each morning to check the news to see if the predictions and fears of where this crisis is going have come real and at the same time, I hear story after story of how they have, to individuals across our nation and across the world. This is hard. Fear is real. We are scared.

We are scared of what may be, we are scared of what is, and we are scared of losing everything we know and have been. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, we are grieving.

Loss is something I think each of us can relate to. We've all lost someone we have loved, whether it was the death of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, or the loss of some physical item that we love. Loss is real and it is difficult and for the person in the midst of the loss it is the very worst thing they have gone through. Can you relate? Think back to a time of loss for you – was it the death of someone you loved? Was it the loss of a job or a friendship? Even young children can relate when they lose that special something that they hold dear, like a blanket or a stuffed animal. Dealing with a loss is hard work and it is emotionally and physically draining and when it is a loss where stuff seems like everything is out of our control it is especially difficult to find the focus to move forward.

Every day we watch the images and we read the reports of what this crisis looks like at the front lines. We stand in grocery stores and look at empty shelves. We see the loss of lives, we see the loss of the lives we loved, we see the loss of what might be. It feels like we are in an eternal march to the cross and on this 5th Sunday of Lent our lessons literally take us to a valley of dry bones and a tomb.

“Lazarus is dead,” Jesus tells the disciples.

It's not hard to imagine the questions that were probably going through the minds of the disciples, let alone how Martha and Mary were feeling. They are the same questions that I have been asking myself over the past couple of weeks. They are the same questions that we ask whenever something happens in our lives that we don't expect. They are the same questions that we ask when things happen that force us to remember just how precious life is.

Why? What's happening? What's next? What is going on? How did this happen? What could we have done differently? Why now? Why me? What's will life be like now? How can this be happening? Why didn't God do something? What will tomorrow bring? In the midst of things we don't understand we are left with so many questions and I'm sure you could add your own to this list. We are left with so many questions.

The root of all our questions about this crisis and so many of our losses is at the heart of God's question God asks the prophet and priest, Ezekiel, in our first lesson for today. God takes Ezekiel and places him right in the middle of a valley full of bones and asks him “Mortal, can these bones live?” Isn't that the question we want to know in the midst of this crisis – in the midst of this fear of what might be and in the midst of the loss that we are facing – will there be life? Will I live? Will the ones I love survive this? Will our economy survive? Will things go back to the way they were? What will things look like after this is all over? Will these bones live?

Isn't that the answer you want to know? I do. But if we are really honest about these questions there isn't an easy answer to them and if life has taught me anything it is that these questions aren't ones that

are just going to be answered once. These are questions that we ask, over and over, as we face the challenges of life.

Some of you who know me, know that I've walked a few valleys in my life, the most significant for me was being diagnosed with a rare, deadly cancer just over 6 years ago. My family asked those same questions that many of you are asking. Why me? Why now? What did I do? Will I survive? What will happen to my children? When I reached remission and finished treatment the questions didn't go away, they just changed. Will I be cancer free forever? What if it comes back? Every ache, every pain, led me to the question of "Is it back?" And then when it returned, in full force in my lungs and I got the diagnoses that said there was no cure and that my future was limited – the questions grew even more. The valley is real and it is scary.

Beyond the questions, there was the disappointment that what I thought I had beat was once again there. That is where Mary and Martha are in today's gospel (John 11:1-45). "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," They both ask it separately because they both are individually disappointed that this is the outcome they are faced with. The crowds, as well, are disappointed, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" The question "Why?" is wrapped in the disappointment.

We want answers, we want to know the answer to the question why, with explanations. We want to be able to understand and make sense of the confusion we are faced with, but more often than not, there is no answers. Will we someday understand this Covid-19 virus? Will we someday be able to explain where things went wrong? Will we someday be able to have an answer to what can stop it? Probably but will it truly answer the questions that we have and the plea we utter in our prayers "Lord, if you had been here..."

But there in Mary and Martha's disappointment and in their grief, where do we find Jesus? He is right there, isn't he? It's right there in every confirmation student's favorite verse to memorize because it is so short, verse 35, "Jesus began to weep". Jesus doesn't come back at Martha and Mary with his own disappointment for their lack of faith. Jesus doesn't scold them for their disappointment nor does he dismiss their feelings. Instead Jesus enters into their pain.

There are many who in the midst of this crisis have tried to make sense of it by saying that somehow God is doing this to us. That God caused this. I just can't believe that God could cause our world to have this much fear and pain, any more than I can believe that God caused me to have cancer or that somehow God needed another angel in heaven when someone dies un-expectedly. Our God is not a God that stands from afar and judges our actions, nor is our God some master puppeteer manipulating our world. Our God takes on human flesh and blood and knows our pains and our loss. Jesus weeps with Martha and Mary at their loss and Jesus knows our grief and is with us in the midst of it.

Jesus weeps with those that are alone and dying in hospitals without their loved ones surrounding them. Jesus weeps with medical professionals when they separate from their families, so as not to expose them to this virus. Jesus feels our pain in our isolation and loneliness. Jesus longs with us, as we long to be the body of Christ gathered in one place to worship God.

When I was re-diagnosed and given 6 months to live – I was angry at all the things that Cancer was taking away from me. My congregation that I left to focus on my treatments, my future, my children's

future. I felt so betrayed by my own body, felt so confused about what was. It was as if God picked me up and placed me in the valley of dried bones and there was nothing and yet it was as if God said to me "Mortal can these bones live?" I'm not sure I would have had the faith then to have answered even as Ezekiel did, "O, Lord God, you know" and yet God kept showing up bringing life to dried bones. God kept coming in prayers across our synod and our Church. God kept coming in cards and Facebook messages. God kept coming in nurses and doctors and valet people. God kept breathing life in relationships that supported me and God kept breathing life in me, even when I struggled to understand.

There are days when I feel like Lazarus – I was supposed to be dead but I'm not. My health at this point is such that I have no evidence of disease and they don't know how long or why and while I have no evidence of disease, I am not cured, because there is no cure for metastatic Triple Negative Breast Cancer. I live everyday with an unknown. I don't know how long this will last. I don't know if it will last. I don't know when it will come back and I don't even know if it is back. I live from one scan to the next.

Basically, I don't know what tomorrow might bring. Which is to say that this Covid-19 crisis is just one more thing that I live not knowing what is going to happen next. But and this is a really big BUT right now, it's a game changer for me. I don't know how Covid-19 is going to affect me or the people I love BUT I do know that God is right here, right now. I don't know what tomorrow might bring BUT I know that I don't face it alone, God is with me. I don't know how long this will last BUT I know that God will continue with us, through it all.

I know that God is blowing breath into the dry bones of this crisis and bringing life and community in online worship, whether it's Facebook lived, live streamed, recorded or just a printed liturgy that you read as a family. I know that God is blowing breath into the dry bones of this crisis and bringing life in sewn masks for vulnerable people and others in need. I know that God is blowing breath into the dry bones of this crisis in neighbors standing across the street from each other bring friendship and companionship. I know that God is blowing breath into the dry bones of this crisis in doctors and nurses and health care providers that are working tirelessly to provide care for the sick and suffering across our world. I know that God is blowing breath into the dry bones of this crisis in this body of Christ, separated and yet united in prayer and worship.

Jesus said to roll away the stone so that Lazarus could come out, from death to life. What are the stones that you need rolled away that you may see the breath of God bringing life into this world? These are fearful times, I'm not going to tell you your fear isn't real, but I will tell you this, our God is bigger than that fear, the promises that God made to us in our baptism are greater than our fear. Paul reminds us that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus not cancer, not this virus, not even death. We are not alone; God is with us. Amen.