

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 29, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

*Just my imagination once again runnin' way with me.
Tell you it was just my imagination runnin' away with me.*



I'm gonna guess that with "just your imagination," a whole lot of you could hear The Temptations just then, not my unaccompanied solo voice.

Which is one way of rejecting the lie many of us say: namely, that we lack imagination. No, we all have it. And imagination is a wonderful gift.

This morning, I'm thankful for the imagination that gave birth to the vision of the prophet Ezekiel – that amazing story of the dry bones. It doesn't take much imagination on our part to visualize it all: death and new life, a people feeling cut off being fully restored again.

And it doesn't take much imagination to imagine how that vision might speak to our current times. God asks the prophet, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel replies, "O Lord God, you know."

How do we imagine that Q&A? (It probably says something about our state of mind.) For my part, I think the prophet wants to sound reverential, deferential even, but all he can see – everywhere he turns – are bones "... and they were very dry."

And yet – even so – the prophet's words, even if spoken without confidence, speak the truth: that the Spirit of life waits even in valleys of death.

Imagine that.

So I'm thankful to the prophet's imagination.

And I'm thankful, as well, for this morning's gospel, this wonderful story told about the raising of Lazarus. And, again, it doesn't take much imagination on our part to visualize the story.

With just our imagination, we can find our way inside the story.

And in fact, that's a time-honored way of praying with a biblical text. Pick someone – or something – in the story and go back and read it again. Slowly. Let your imagination show you things you missed before.

Maybe you'd imagine what it was like for Mary to send for Jesus to come and save her brother ... and then have to wait – for who knows how long. What did she do while she waited? What did she eat? How did she sleep at night?

And then one day, several days later, while she's still waiting for Jesus to show up, her sister Martha leaves. (Nothing too unusual, I suspect; we all need a break sometimes, a chance to go outside and get away from people.) So Mary just sits there listening to the same old stories people are telling her about Lazarus, a consoling intent that is still a burden for her to bear.

But then, a while later, somebody whispers in Mary's ear, telling her that Martha had gone out to Jesus – who was finally on the way – and that Jesus is now asking for Mary to come, too. And when she hears that Jesus has come, her heart leaps.

She wants so desperately to see him, so she runs out to greet him, to be consoled by him – one whom she loves, one who can console better than the friends who have come before.

But then, when she sees him, the waves of grief and impatience take over and she blurts out:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!

Oh, it comes out like an accusation. Does she regret the words as soon as she says them? Did they pop out too harshly? (I imagine so.)

Or maybe you'd imagine the whole thing from another perspective. You don't have to be a person. If you're imagining your way into a story, you could be a thing.

You could imagine what it was like to be the stone blocking the entrance to the cave where the body of Lazarus was laid. Warm and sun-baked on the outside, soaking up light and heat, looking out on a glorious day in Spring, the air fresh and full of the aromas of new life. But it's all a façade; everything is cold and dark and dank inside – that place where nobody can see. And there's nothing to smell but the putrefying stench of decay, of death.

And when the stranger out front says, "Take away the stone," does the stone resist? Does the stone want to keep others from seeing what it has hidden so well? Does it want to protect the people out there from the horror of what is hidden in the dark?

I want to encourage us to let our imaginations run free with a story such as this.

(And if, perchance, you have some extra time on your hands these days, you could set some of it aside and indulge some imaginative time in prayer with this story – maybe imagining all there is to see and hear and touch and taste and smell from a perspective you've never noticed before.

Some imaginative prayer may bear fruit.)

We need to use our imaginations in any event – we’ll need some imagination if we’re going to make sense of some of the twists and turns. Not every detail is adequately explained for us; we need to fill in the gaps.

Twice we’re told, for example, of moments when Jesus is “greatly disturbed.” It’s clear that Jesus feels this in his gut, but it’s not clear to scholars how to translate this deep emotion. Is Jesus “greatly angered”? or “profoundly moved”? or “deeply saddened”???

The meaning isn’t clear, so we’re obliged to imagine what’s going on.

My imagination tells me that part of what’s going on – though it’s only part – is that Jesus is bothered by the misconception that his presence will stop all bad things – including death – from occurring. Martha says it first:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Mary says it next:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

I think Jesus is bothered by what they say, by the naïveté that he came to keep us from being sad, to protect us from pain, to stave off grief, to block out suffering, to forestall death.

Jesus – or faith in Jesus – is no shield against death or sadness or fear. And everyone misses that point. “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man,” they ask, “have kept this man from dying?”

But even more – and maybe it’s because everyone is a bit confused about what they thought Jesus was supposed to do for them – I think they all fail to see why Jesus is so distraught at all.

I notice that Jesus doesn’t begin to cry when he hears that Lazarus has died; it’s not the news of his death that disturbs Jesus so deeply.

When Mary weeps ... that’s when Jesus’ gut clenches.

And when he comes with her and everyone else to the tomb ... that’s when Jesus begins to weep.

“See how he loved him!” the people say. But his tears are not just for Lazarus – or for himself.

Jesus weeps for Mary and for Martha ... and for us all. “God so loved the world ...” That’s what Jesus told us once. And so, here, Jesus weeps for all of humanity, for all the sadness and grief in the world. Our pain is his pain. Our sorrow his sorrow.

But that's not the end of the story. Jesus tells the onlookers to remove the stone at the entrance to the cave and (after an objection from Martha), they do so. Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" And he does. And Jesus tells those looking on to offer Lazarus a hand. "Unbind him, and let him go!"

I don't know about you, but I want to know what happens next. The Bible never tells us so, so we're left, once more, to imagine the life Lazarus goes on to live.

Now I can imagine Lazarus coming out of his tomb and returning to his home with Martha and Mary. I can imagine that he re-assumes the responsibilities that go with being the man of the house. I can imagine that he'll go on (in the years ahead) to start a family of his own, living up to whatever expectations were laid upon him by those around him. I can easily imagine he'd be content to enjoy whatever diversions he enjoyed before the illness that led to his confinement.

And I don't know that there's anything wrong with returning to his old life ... if that's the life he reclaims for himself.

But the thing is, I can imagine Lazarus coming out of his tomb and wanting more out of his new lease on a new life. I can imagine Lazarus being stunned by the brightness of the sun and amazed at breathing in the clean air of Spring. I can imagine Lazarus taking delight in caterpillars and the birds of the air. I can imagine Lazarus holding his sisters, one in each arm, and telling them how absolutely precious they are to him.

I can imagine Lazarus refusing ever again to cower in the face of death, knowing deep in his dry bones that the Spirit of life waits even in the tomb, that the love of God is stronger than the grave.

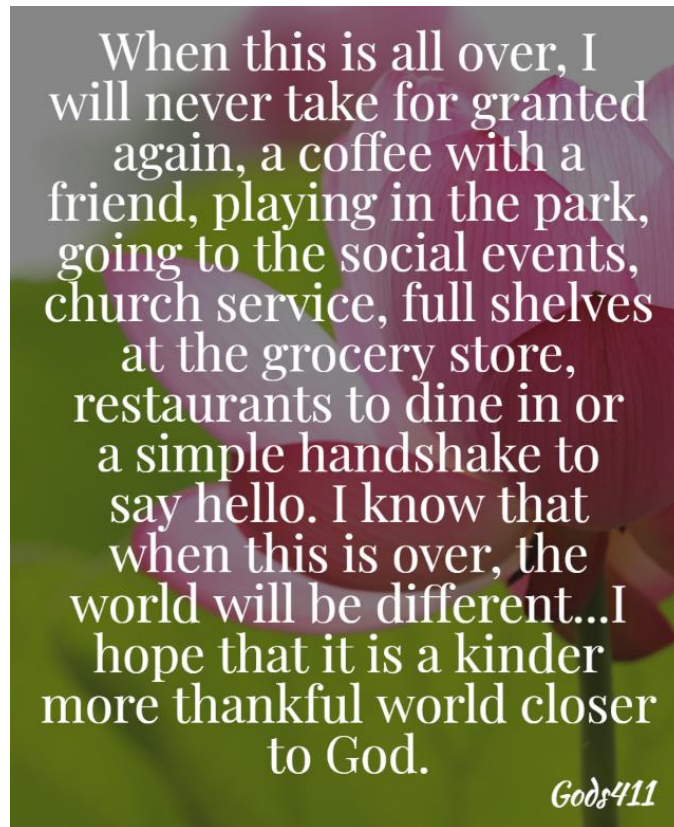
We have been given the gift of imagination. It's a gift that welcomes us into these sacred stories of the Bible. It's a gift that helps us make sense of what we read there. And it's a gift that can help us imagine a future we have not yet had spelled out for us.

You know, we won't be told we have to stay home forever. There will come a day when we are let out, set free again. And when that day comes, maybe we'll all go back to doing the things we did before – enjoying the diversions we used to enjoy. (And that might not be too bad.)

Or maybe ... just maybe, we'll take delight in a new lease on a new life together – walking the Way of Love with one another and the God who calls us to abundant life.

What will life look like for us post-pandemic? Imagine, if you will.

I'll leave you with some words Gaye Lawson, our deacon, shared recently:



Imagine what yet shall be.

And may we live and long to make it so!