

Sermon for Sunday, March 26, 2023

Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Gotta Go Through It!”

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Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Before the readings:

Our scriptures today are pretty intense. I invite you to pay attention to what emerges for you as you listen. What comes to mind? How does your body feel? How is it with your spirit? Let yourself experience what comes up. It can be uncomfortable to do that. Yet it can also be so helpful, in this safe and contained space, to stay with whatever emerges as we are held by God and by others. So, I invite you to listen to the words and listen within.

After the readings:

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

What did you notice, what emerged for you, as you listened to our scripture? I noticed questions that echo what so many of us in Iowa throughout the world are asking these days:

Can these bones live?

Is hope possible?

Why does Jesus linger when someone he loves is ill?

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

It's too late Jesus, what can you do now?

Can there be new life, change, transformation, resurrection in Iowa, in the US, in our world?

I also felt a lot of emotion as I pictured a valley of dry bones, and as I heard phrases like:

"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

"Out of the depths I cry to you Lord."

"If you had been here my brother would not have died."

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."

"Jesus began to weep."

That's all pretty intense, especially when the world is so hard. If you tune into any news source in the morning, it's possible to have so many questions and a whole lot of feels before your day has even started, before coffee even. Yet I wonder if God is working in these scriptures to help us experience this hard stuff together as we worship, so that we can also experience catharsis and release. It's uncomfortable to experience what's hard. Our culture tells us it's better to buy something instead, or stay busy, or look on the bright side.

Except when we don't feel what's hard; those feelings have more power over us. And we can get stuck in apathy, immobilized by despair, tied up in knots wondering what to do next. It's like the bear hunt song, with hard stuff: can't go over it, can't go under it, gotta go through it. If we can feel what's hard and move it through our bodies, then we can experience release.

That's what Jesus does at Lazarus' grave. He receives Martha and Mary's anger and sorrow without judgment. He feels his own grief and sorrow in his body. He's greatly disturbed, deeply moved. The Greek used gives us the sense that Jesus feels it all like a punch in the gut, that his stomach is churning. He weeps. He feels all the feels and lets them move through him. He prays. And then Jesus acts. He isn't immobilized by the difficult feelings because he's experienced them and let them go. He isn't stopped by what seems impossible challenges, by people who think it's too late, by the anger or skepticism that are palpable all around him.

Instead, Jesus can do what he's come to do, the work that is his to do. He raises Lazarus to new life. Jesus also gives the crowd work to do. "Take away the stone," Jesus says. Then, after Lazarus emerges from the tomb, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth, Jesus says to the crowd, "Unbind him and let him go." Jesus says to all the grieving, angry, fearful people: do the work that is yours to do. Use your hands, your love, your grief and join God in helping Lazarus reclaim his life. I wonder how many other people were unbound and returned to their life that day by two key things Jesus did at Lazarus' grave. He moved through the hard feelings and he got to work.

When we feel stuck, tied up in knots, immobilized by all the hard stuff in our world, this is a powerful pattern for us to follow. Feel it all and then get to work helping each other reclaim our lives. Use our hands, our love, our grief to roll away stones and dismantle the things that bind: poverty, racism, homophobia, ageism, sexism, climate change. Do the work that is yours to do in the world. Teach, advocate, raise the funds, pray, send a care, hold a child close, plant a garden, protest, write letters, call, pray, bring a meal, learn, listen, help. As we feel the feels, we experience release. So today as we sing and worship and come to the table, stay with whatever you feel. You are held, God is with you. As we get to work rolling away stones and unbinding others, we are freed from despair and apathy.

In all of this, we are not alone.

We are accompanied always, in all the feelings, and in all the work, by Jesus.

He knows our pain deep in his being.

He gives us the forgiveness, courage, strength and love that we need to hope and act.

And always, each new day Jesus raises us up to new life.