

## Faith Reflection – Sunday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020

All three of our Scripture readings today have to do with hope, something that is so needed right now in our world as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. In reading these passages over early this week I was especially struck by a verse in Ezekiel 37. Ezekiel is looking out at his people, the people of Israel who are at a very low point in their history, and he sees despair and death in every direction. It's as if he's in a valley full of bones. Ankle bones, shin bones, hip bones, everywhere bones. Not a sign of life anywhere to be seen. Those dry bones symbolize the people of Israel. Verse 11 says, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Those words "we are cut off completely" jumped off the page for me. I think that many of us are feeling "cut off" these days: cut off from family and friends, cut off from the freedom and activities we usually enjoy, cut off from daily life as we knew it, staying instead at home, unable to go far, and having our lives restricted in many ways. This is a difficult time for everyone, as we face this unprecedented global health crisis together.

Our two other Scripture readings also capture some of those feelings of hopelessness and despair we may be experiencing. Psalm 130 begins with a prayer: "Out of the depths I cry to you, God – hear my voice!" It goes on to talk about waiting in hope, trusting in God's presence and love. The Psalm has a beautiful refrain: "I wait for you, God, my soul waits...more than the watchers long for morning, more than the watchers long for morning." Our Gospel reading tells the beautiful story of Jesus coming to the home of his friends Mary and Martha and going with them to the tomb of their brother Lazarus who has died. We wonder about Jesus' initial response in this story: when he receives word that Lazarus is ill he doesn't drop everything to rush to his friend's side, but stays two days longer where he is, only going to Bethany after Lazarus has died and been buried. But we have to remember that this story is in John's Gospel, which is all about signs and symbols that point beyond themselves to tell us something about God. And the sign here is about God bringing new life and hope to the world. The name "Lazarus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew word "Eleazar", which means "one whom God helps." And Jesus certainly does help Lazarus, in a most dramatic way: going to the tomb with Martha and Mary, weeping with them in their grief, then calling Lazarus to come out of the tomb – which he does – incredibly alive. This final sign done by Jesus sets in motion the plot against his life, foreshadowing his own death and resurrection, which we are moving closer towards now. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and we will begin to walk even closer with Jesus towards the cross and the hope and joy that lies beyond it.

A valley of dry bones – come to life by the gift of God’s Spirit. An individual crying out to God, trusting that the light will come. A dead man named “one whom God helps” brought back to life. These are all stories of hope, something that we all need so much in this time we’re in – hope that the pandemic will eventually come to an end and there will be new life on the other side, hope that we will get through it together, hope that whatever happens, God will be with us. As Christians hope is central to our faith, seen nowhere more clearly than this journey we are on now, walking with Jesus through the wilderness of Lent, knowing that his story and ours will end with joy and resurrection.

A few years ago Rev. Suzanna Bates gave me a gift of a beautiful cross with the word “Hope” written on it. The cross was made in South Africa, where Suzanna was born and raised, and she bought it on a trip that she and Peggy took a on a holiday one year. As we know, South Africa is a country that has known a lot of despair and hopelessness, but also hope. The decades of apartheid and the struggle for freedom and equality for all people did eventually end, bringing a new beginning and peace. May such knowledge of the possibility and gift of hope sustain us in this time of COVID-19, as we trust that God will bring us through it to new joy, new beginnings, new life. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Gracious God,  
we give you thanks for your gift of hope.  
Be with all those today who have given up hope in our world,  
especially those who are struggling with the impact of the COVID-19  
virus in their lives.  
Help us to be hope-bearers and hope-bringers,  
sharing your peace, love and hope with others.  
in the name of Christ. Amen.