

LECTIONARY GUIDE for Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:17-45

In the Hebrew Bible the Prophet Ezekiel tells us a dramatic story about walking through the valley of dry bones. There are three parts: v. 1-4 Introduction; v. 5-10 Speech; and v. 11-14 Explanation.

In the first part, the phrase, “*hand of the Lord,*” is important and parallels “*spirit of the Lord.*” It embodies God’s salvation of the Hebrews during social and political crises. It appears 190 times in the Hebrew Bible! The valley reminds Hebrews of the Return to the Promised Land; however, it is also the place where they remain. So, it is a location of both death and life, bones and breath, challenge and opportunity. After two verses of silence, we hear the first words with sound, *Mortal (Ben-adam), can these bones live?* (v. 3) In the second part, we hear, “*I will cause breath (Hebrew ruach which means breath, wind, spirit) to enter you, and you shall live.*” (v. 5) Here there is much play-on-words; sometimes meaning *breath*, other times *wind* or *spirit*. The phrase “*the four winds*” is said to be the earliest use of this phrase in the entire Bible! Finally, in the third part, we hear the explanation of the valley as the whole house of Israel (v. 11); namely, that God breaks in at times of public disaster as God did in Samaria in 722 BCE and in Jerusalem in 587 BCE to give life, breath and a future.

In the New Testament the Gospel of John recounts the story of the Raising of Lazarus with Martha and Mary.

It is the final of seven signs showing that Jesus *is* the Christ, and is told only by John. Here we see Jesus finally arrive at Lazarus’ tomb in Bethany, having been invited by Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha *went out* to meet him, telling him that had he come earlier her brother would not be dead. Jesus says “*Your brother will rise again.*” She interpreted what he said as a Temple-goer, replying “*He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.*” (v. 24) But Jesus said, “*I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?*” (v. 25) She agreed, “*I believe that you are the Messiah.*” (v. 27) Then Mary *went out* to meet Jesus. She said like her sister that had he come earlier, Lazarus would not be dead. Jesus saw her and the Jews, who were with her, weeping. We are told, “*He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved...and began to weep.*” (v. 33-5) So, he returned to the tomb and commanded those gathered to remove the stone from the tomb. Then he spoke to his Father, and shouted, “*Lazarus, come out...unbind him and let him go.*” (v. 43-44)” He, still wrapped in cloth, came out, and many believed in Jesus.

Ten Questions

1. What do these two stories tell us about life and death, physical life and spiritual life?
2. Have you ever found yourself, or someone you love, in the valley of dry bones--a place of death and life, bones and flesh, challenge and opportunity?
How did this affect you and others?
3. What became like “the hand of God” or “the spirit of God,” which helped you to get through your experience to the land of milk and honey, green pastures and flowing streams?
4. Breath, wind and spirit were as important to the Hebrews as to early Christians and us. Can you describe any experiences of breathing, winds or spirit that were important? For example, during Covid-19 might breath take on added significance for us? During the Harwich Tornado or Bomb Cyclone, might wind have taken on new meaning?
5. Can you think of a time when it seemed that God protected a people, your people, this congregation, or your family from destruction or harm?
6. The last time we heard about Jesus with Lazarus is when Jesus healed him, alongside Mary and Martha. This time Jesus raises Lazarus from death, again near his sisters. What can you tell about Lazarus? What can you tell about his sisters, (personalities, similarities/differences, likes/dislikes, and how they both came to believe)?
7. John tells us that Jesus was *greatly disturbed in spirit, deeply moved and began to weep*. Despite one sentence’s brevity (*Jesus wept*), these are observant descriptions of Jesus’ genuine emotional state at the time. What does this encourage about how we express our emotions? Have you ever been agitated in spirit, deeply moved or wept in public? What resulted?
8. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, resuscitated him, if you will. What does it mean to be *brought out* of death (See Ezekiel 37:1 and John 11:44) unbound and set free? Can you name any who have experienced this?
9. Have you ever felt as though you were “brought out” of death and “set down” in green pastures, place of love and delight? How did it happen? What resulted?

10. With Covid-19 surrounding us, like a valley of dry bones or a tomb, how can we answer Jesus' call to "come out" and be "let go"? What might help you to reconnect with life?

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