

Worship at Home for March 29, 2020

You may choose to read right through this document, stopping for your own reflection at any time, or only read the prayers or the scripture or reflection. You might read with family or friends, or alone. Links will take you to music that may enhance your experience as you move through the worship, but you might choose to visit them later, or not at all. Feel free to share this with anyone who might be interested.

If you'd like to comment or have a question, please email me directly:
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In the Spirit

Rev. Joanne

Centering Prayer

We breathe, Holy Source,
knowing that with each inhale, we can take in your peace.
We breathe, God of the Cosmos,
knowing that with each exhale we can release our fears.
We breathe, God,
knowing that you are as close as each breath we take.
Amen

Opening Music

Cat Stevens: 'Morning Has Broken'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rifby1tVE8>

Opening Prayer

Loving and Creating God, you have made snow-covered mountains and powerful tides, you have crafted delicate butterflies and spring crocuses, you have created humanity with many gifts and skills, and in rich diversity.
Remind us that in a time of distance, a time of change and uncertainty, your creating work continues in us and around us. You continue the work of knitting us together as community, your Spirit leads us into new ways of connecting, and Jesus leads us into compassionate and caring response to the COVID-19 crisis. We pray as your people, intimately connected to you always,
Amen

First Scripture Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in

the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'

Do you have 'dry' places in your life right now? Are there ways that you might be feeling disjointed or disconnected – "cut off completely"? Have you had an experience in which God's love or the presence of the Spirit has helped you to feel more alive or part of community?

Second Scripture Selected verses from John 11:1-45 adapted from *The Message*

A man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. This was the same Mary who massaged the Lord's feet with aromatic oils and then wiped them with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Master, the one you love so very much is sick." When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son."

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, but oddly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he was for two more days. After the two days, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." They said, "Rabbi, you can't do that. The authorities are out to kill you, and you're going back?" Jesus then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up." The disciples said, "Master, if he's gone to sleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine." Jesus was talking about death, while his disciples thought he was talking about taking a nap.

Then Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him." That's when Thomas, the one called the Twin, said to his companions, "Come along. We might as well die with him."

When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead. Bethany was near Jerusalem, only a couple of miles away, and many of the faith community were visiting Martha and Mary, sympathizing with them over their brother. Martha heard Jesus was coming and went out to meet him.

Mary remained in the house. Martha said, "Master, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask God he will give you."

Jesus said, "Your brother will be raised up."

Martha replied, "I know that he will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time."

"You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Master. All along I have believed that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who comes into the world."

After saying this, she went to her sister Mary and whispered in her ear, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you." The moment she heard that, she jumped up and ran out to him. Jesus had not yet entered the town but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When her sympathizing friends saw Mary run off, they followed her, thinking she was on her way to the tomb to weep there. Mary came to where Jesus was waiting and fell at his feet, saying, "Master, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her sobbing and those with her sobbing, a deep anger welled up within him. He said, "Where did you put him?" "Master, come and see," they said.

Now Jesus wept.

The gathered said, "Look how deeply he loved him." Others among them said, "Well, if he loved him so much, why didn't he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man."

Then Jesus, the anger again welling up within him, arrived at the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it. Jesus said, "Remove the stone." The sister of the dead man, Martha, said, "Master, by this time there's a stench. He's been dead four days!" Jesus looked her in the eye. "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Then, to the others, "Go ahead, take away the stone."

They removed the stone. Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and prayed, "Father, I'm grateful that you have listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I've spoken so that they might believe that you sent me."

Then he shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And he came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him loose." That was a turnaround for many of the Jews who were with Mary. They saw what Jesus did, and believed in him.

Reflection

As I watched probably too many reports and videos, and read probably too many articles about the COVID-19 pandemic, I really wanted an escape in our scriptures this week. I wanted a 'nice' story, perhaps of Jesus with a child on his knee, or teaching from a boat, or curing a little girl. In the midst of hearing about the life-denying actions of some who refuse to acknowledge the absolute necessity of physically distancing, hand washing, and staying home; faced with rising numbers of infected and dead in our province, I wanted to 'get away from it all' as I immersed myself in our readings.

Yet there it was – in both the Old and New Testament verses - life and death, bone and breath, grief and tears – those aspects of our readings for today that seemed to be mirrored in news from near and far.

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is a dramatic, pivotal, and important story on our journey to Easter. Unique to John's gospel, this is a story of the last of Jesus' signs that are part of the flow of John's gospel, and central to the portrayal of Jesus that this gospel builds. In this story we once again meet Mary and Martha, obviously well known to their community and perhaps women of some influence as the gospel writer refers to Bethany as their town. They are not only followers and friends of Jesus, but also faithful members of their faith community. Their simple declarations to Jesus – questions any one of us might ask when we have experienced loss - and statements of faith in this reading are sincere and powerful, as is their grief. This description of Lazarus' death is a glimpse into Jesus' personal life as well as his role as the One who is Word made flesh. If we read just a few verses after the assigned reading ends, we discover that this action – this raising of Lazarus – was the final act that caused the religious authorities to see Jesus as a real threat that had to be eliminated.

Some describe the fourth gospel as the least human representation of Jesus, which begins with, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us." (*John 1:1, 14a*) Yet there are two words in this passage that always strike to the core of Jesus' humanity - "Jesus wept."

Jesus wept, perhaps for the loss of a friend he loved. Those who observed him weeping and commented on his love for Lazarus used the Greek word *philia* – meaning the common love we share with friends and family, not the self-giving *agape* we might have expected to find. This fully human and fully divine Jesus wept with his friends Mary and Martha in their grief. This earth-walking-presence-of-God does not hide himself – or us – from this pain.

And this should give us comfort and hope, as much as the miracle of Lazarus returning from the dead. Why? Because the tears of Jesus remind us that our own tears when we feel pain or loss are legitimate, that sometimes there are no words, just tears. Jesus tears tell us clearly that God weeps when we weep as much as God dances when we know joy.

Finally we come to the entrance to that tomb – that stone that is rolled away, with hints forward to another tomb where women will weep, to another stone that will be rolled away at Easter's dawn. With tears and prayer, Jesus orders the stone removed. Jesus' shouted command to Lazarus might feel like a command to us as well. "Lazarus, come out!" Come out from the dark places that have held you, come out from death-like distance from God. Come out and be God's people, your lives forever changed.

This action of raising Lazarus does not depend on the faith of Mary and Martha, does not depend on those gathered believing that Jesus is the Word made flesh. It is simply the power of God shared in a time and place that foreshadows the time when death and darkness will be forever banished. It is an action that calls forth faith, rather than relying on anyone's faith to make it happen.

Think on our present situation as a global pandemic causes grief and tears, loss of security, loss of contact, loss of income, loss of freedom to gather, loss of life. Yet there are stories to share that can call forth our faith – individuals offering care in the shape of phone calls made and errands run, the dedication of medical professionals, the creative ways that people are reaching out and interacting. Together, we are calling each other out from our isolated places.

There will be a day – we don't know when yet – when we will physically be called out of our individual spaces, no longer sealed in, no longer distant, and we will celebrate as we return to physical community to share handshakes and hugs. And at that time, I believe we may be called to “unbind” one another, as those at the tomb of Lazarus were told to remove his grave cloths. We could be listening to each other's stories of isolation or supporting those who need a little time to get used to moving freely again.

In the meantime, we remember that Jesus knows us, God knows us, and that we are never truly alone as we move from dark to light, as we journey from being bound by our fears and our worries to letting our faith lift us, as we move through the unknown.

Thanks be to God.
Amen

Music: “When Jesus Wept”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOVsfyFhNZw>

Prayers of the people

Gracious and Compassionate God, we offer our prayers of thanks and gratitude today.
We also offer prayers for others, and we offer you our hearts and our thoughts.

We thank you, God, for health care professionals giving their best in challenging times – nurses and personal care workers, caregivers and lab technicians, doctors and researchers and so many others.

We pray that they find courage and strength in their long days of work.

We thank you for our friends and our families – especially those who continue to reach out to connect with us in different ways than we are used to connecting.

We pray for our families, God, for parents and children sharing space, for those families facing economic uncertainty, for those families mourning a death, for those families yearning to be able to be physically present to one another.

We thank you, God, for leaders and decision makers in our country, province and city who calmly provide us with clear news, and who are working to keep us healthy, secure and safe.

We pray that they continue to be guided by compassion, equity, and wisdom.

Finally, God of our hearts, we pray for ourselves, and those we are worried about ...

you might choose to name a person out loud – and name your own fears and worries

Gather our prayers, God, remind us that you are as close as our own breath, and give us hope and peace in times of struggle. Remind us always that you call us to answer prayer in our own lives, through our own actions, in answer to your call.

Amen

Closing music: "Here I am, Lord"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcl9S5a3weU>

Blessing

As you move throughout your week, know that
God, who sang the universe into being, goes with you;
Jesus, who is God's love song to the world, accompanies you;
and that you are surrounded by the Holy Spirit
who sings God's love into each and every heart,
each and every day. Amen

Taizé Community: "Let Your Servant now Go in Peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNldOhiW-8k&list=PLAFC3BF61F242A1C6&index=31>