

Lent 5, Year A
March 9, 2008

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

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For the Sundays in Lent, of which this is the last, we have been looking at the promises we make in baptism and in the renewal of baptism, one of the five each week, in light of the gospel reading for the day.

We began with this question, “Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord?” This came on the Sunday Jesus resisted Satan in the wilderness. Jesus did not fall into sin, which is to say there is no separation between him and God. But then, he WAS God, a part of God. We are not, and there is a separation between us and God. It’s up to us to work to close that gap and to come closer to God, allowing God to help.

Next came the question, Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?” It was the Sunday the gospel led us to read of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, so his fellow Pharisees would not know it, to express some measure of praise for Jesus, but he could not understand when Jesus spoke to him about being born of the Spirit. He couldn’t allow himself, down-to-earth and rule-bound as he was, to embrace the mystery of the Spirit of God. So he couldn’t proclaim by word OR example. We must believe in order to tell the story of God become human and living among us. And, when we believe, we express our faith also by the example of our lives.

Then we asked the question, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? And we read the account of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well and transforming her life. He did it by allowing her to see herself in his eyes, by holding up before her a mirror so she could see herself, and, seeing her faults, he still offered her the living water of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in all of us and we seek him in others.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent we asked, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? And we watched as Jesus chose a mere shell of a man, who had never been able to see, and gave him both sight and insight and he became a believer. By healing this marginalized person, Jesus demonstrated the power of God to heal and to heal everybody. Everybody, that is, who was receptive to him. The Pharisees became more and more blind in this story, even as the man gained greater sight.

Finally, on this fifth Sunday of the season of Lent, comes the first question which is asked when we take our baptismal vows. It’s this: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

Well, there’s just one place where the community of Christ’s followers does these things together, and that’s at church. We read and study the teachings of the apostles, and every time we share fellowship together we do

that after the model of Jesus and his disciples. We break the bread at the Lord's table every Sunday when we gather to worship, and we pray together. Of course we pray alone, personally, too, but the power of prayer is increased when we come together and open ourselves to God as a community.

So this first question is really asking, "Will you come to church regularly, and use that opportunity to grow in faith?"

Holy Week services lie directly ahead for us. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. I urge you to live with Christ in the liturgies of this powerful week. It is truly the only way to really comprehend what Easter is all about. We need to see the connection between Good Friday and the Day of Resurrection. In the worship of Holy Week we experience how it feels to be without Jesus for three long days, and that deepens the joy of Easter immeasurably.

A friend of mine often says, when there is talk about the Church and its leaders and their goals, and the troubles we have sometimes had, that the only proper thing for a Christian to aspire to, the only thing we really ought to work for, is a deeper relationship with God. Not greater status within the institution of the Church, not rewards for our work, not acclaim for proclaiming Christ best or most thoroughly, but only that it should be said, "this person sought a deeper relationship with God." The way to that deeper relationship is a regular habit of opening ourselves to God.

We have had three very rich scripture readings this morning, and a wonderful Psalm. I invite you to read them again later, when you have some quiet time. Read again the story of God breathing life into the defeated and exhausted people of Israel as the dry bones in the valley come to life and are covered with sinew and flesh and as God promises to open the people's graves and cause them to live again.

Hear the apostle Paul say to the church at Rome that they must set their minds on the Spirit and not on the flesh. It is the Spirit that will give them life, because Christ is in them and therefore they are filled with the Spirit.

Then see how Jesus raises his friend, Lazarus, from death. This is, in fact, what faith in him does for us. He raises us up out of those things in us that rob us of life – out of the drudgery of the daily grind, out of long-held grudges that kill the spirit, out of hopelessness about the future, out of our giving in to all those things that drag us down. Jesus lifts up.

He lifts us up to the living water of new life that he brought to the Samaritan woman; lifts us up to the Spirit which is so ready to be alive in us if we can reach for it, as Nicodemus could not; lifts us up to the sight and insight that he brought into the life of the man born blind; lifts us up to new life as he says to his friends Lazarus, who was dead, "Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus rises from the dead.

Of course, Lazarus will die again some day. Lazarus is mortal, like us. But when Jesus rises from the dead it will be a resurrection of the Spirit in which all of us participate.

May God bless you and give you ever-deepening insight into your baptismal promises. And may you have the will to be present with him and with us in the week of his Last Supper, his betrayal, his trial, his crucifixion, and in the joy of his rising to new life.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria