

**5 Lent
April 2, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In yesterday's comics in The Record ... in the comic titled Brevity ... two men are standing at a bus stop talking to each other. One of them is covered in dirt. The clean man says to the other, "Hey, how's your digging-the-deepest-hole-in-the-world addiction been going?" The man covered in dirt says, "Not good. I'm afraid I've hit bottom again."

Most of us have significant points in our life journey that we can point to as transformative. Maybe it was a career choice, or when you met your spouse, or when you overcame a major illness, or maybe when you bottomed out from an addiction.

The Jewish people have some key stories that define their identity. The ancestors of our faith ... Abraham and Sarah is one of those stories; Moses in the wilderness ... and the giving of the Law on a mountain top ... is another; and the exile to Babylon and the return of the Jews to Israel is a third. Which leads us to the reading we heard this morning about the Valley of Dry Bones. It is about the Israelites feeling like they had bottomed out. But God had another idea ... he wasn't finished with them yet.

You may remember that in the 6th century BCE the Assyrians invaded Israel and deported the occupants to live in exile in Babylon. Now, these were the people of Yahweh who called themselves the "chosen people." So, what had changed in their relationship to God that God would let this happen to them? The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed ... they had been shipped off to a foreign land ... and the people of Israel felt that God had given up on them. So, in turn they all but gave up on their faith in Yahweh.

The people of Israel were spiritually dead in their exile home. They felt like they had bottomed out. They were like dried bones lying on the ground. And it was to these people that God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel. Even when they felt as dead as dry bones in the desert, God could put flesh on the bones, breathe spirit into them, and bring them back to life. What looked like the end to the exiled people was not the end. What looked like death was not death. God was not finished with the people of Israel.

The same was true for Mary and Martha in the time of Jesus ... God was not finished with them, even in their grief over their brother's death. God, through Jesus, gave them another chance. Buried in a cave, surrounded by the stench of four days of death, Jesus called Lazarus back to life.

A while ago I caught a segment on the Today show about a young couple with an 18 month old daughter. The father had been diagnosed with stage two colon cancer, and a week later the mother was diagnosed with stage four metastatic breast cancer. A young couple, with all the dreams and hopes of a lifetime ahead of them, caught in dire, life-threatening and life-changing circumstances.

Yet, in the midst of their pain and confusion there was a sense of life. When asked how he coped with the situation the father said, "I'm not going to allow the fear of what the future might look like define my life in the present. I have a beautiful wife and a wonderful daughter and I'm going to make sure that every minute I have with them is lived in the fullest. We have hope that everything will turn out okay, but if one or both of us has to leave this life, we don't want to leave with unfinished business."

I believe the lessons from Ezekiel and John's gospel this morning speaks to this issue. On the one hand the wonderful image of a valley full of dry bones being brought back to life by the breath of God coming from the four winds says to me that God is never finished with the people of God. On the other hand, Martha's and Mary's plea to Jesus that "Had you been here he would not have died," indicates the possibility of some unfinished business between Lazarus and his sisters.

If you were to die tomorrow, what unfinished business would you leave behind? This question isn't about all the dreams you have for the rest of your life, or about issues like having an updated will or getting that last project finished, or checking off items on your bucket list. This question is about the unfinished business with the significant people of our lives ... our family and friends ... our parents, siblings, children ... our husband, wife or partner ... and even ourselves. It is a question about the unfinished business we have with God. It is about letting the people in our lives who really matter know that we love them, and giving them the chance to say the same to us. It is about forgiving those who have hurt us, and acknowledging the hurts we have caused others. It is about going to our graves without the regret of unsaid goodbyes.

We must realize that some of the unfinished business just might be with ourselves. Maybe it is the need to forgive ourselves for those times that we have betrayed our own best interests. Or maybe it is coming to love ourselves, even when others have told us all our lives that we are unlovable. Perhaps it is letting go of having to always be "right" and instead living with a generous heart that is willing to be open to other views. Having the faith that God wants you to be more than what you are at this moment ... God is not finished with any of us yet.

I want to be clear about Martha and Mary and Lazarus and Jesus. I don't think "unfinished business" is the point of this gospel story. However, as I re-read the story, and allowed my imagination to envision the scene, I saw Jesus calling out a smelly four-day old corpse from a dark, dank cave. What it brought to mind is how sometimes the

repressed “unfinished business” of our lives and relationships is stuck off in the darkest reaches of our souls, and the longer they lie there the more they stink. As grief stricken as Martha and Mary were about the death of their brother Lazarus they protested when Jesus called for the stone to be rolled away from the mouth of the cave. “Lord, already there is a stench since he has been dead four days.”

What might you do to “finish” that business with the people in your life, even those who have died? And, if there is unfinished business, possibly stuck in some dark cave of your soul, is that unfinished business influencing who you are today? Remember, if it stinks for you it probably stinks for others as well. They may not want to roll away the stone any more than you do. But the alternative is to go to your grave, literally and metaphorically, with this unfinished business.

What was true for the people of Israel in the time of Ezekiel, and true for Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the time of Jesus, is also true for us today. We may not be literally dead, as Lazarus seemed to be, yet I imagine that many of us have known of a metaphorical death that felt much like dry bones in the desert. And I also imagine that most of us know about that unfinished business ... those broken relationships that have not been reconciled ... those apologies that have never been voiced ... the forgiveness that has been withheld ... the love that is taken for granted yet in need of being expressed.

Sometimes unfinished business feels like a loose thread that just cannot be pulled out. However, I believe that God is not finished with us yet. What we want to forgive, but cannot, God will forgive. What we cannot reconcile in this realm, God will reconcile in another realm. The love that we fail to express in this life is expressed by God all the time.

As we journey towards Easter in these last days of Lent let us remember what God has done in the past, and what God can do for us today and tomorrow. My guess is that if you or I were to die tomorrow that most of us would still have unfinished business with those who are, or have been, significant in our lives. I invite you to look at the dry bones of your life, and at the dark and dank places in your soul where some of that unfinished business may lie. And then remember, God was not finished with the people of Israel just because they had given up on God. If God could bring the spirit of life from the four winds then God can bring us the strength and courage to live fully into our lives. If God, in Jesus, could call forth Lazarus from his grave, then God can call life out of those dark places in our lives. It is only when we bring our full selves to God can we live fully into that image of God in which we are made.

Amen.