

Faith Mennonite Church
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Encountering God: Witnessing to our Experience
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From death to Life
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

As we progress through this Lenten season and the stories of encounter with Jesus that are recorded in the gospel of John, the stories not only get longer, but the emotions seem to ratchet up with each story. We began with the quiet, twilight visit of Nicodemus who came and went without fully grasping what Jesus was all about. Then we watched as Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman in the light of day, crossing gender and religious/cultural boundaries, empowering her to share the “living water” she had found with her entire community. Last week we entered the “theatre of the absurd” when a simple act of healing—Jesus restored the sight to a blind man—produced a tug of war in the religious community that twisted that joyful experience into an interrogation about sinfulness. Today we’re talking life and death, or more accurately, death and life!

In the usual order of things in the physical world we move from life to death: we’re born, if all goes well we grow old, and then we die. A number of us are living this reality in a profound way as we accompany parents, relatives and friends who are coming to the end of their physical, temporal lives. But in this story in John, as well as in the reading from Ezekiel, things move in the opposite direction: life follows death! In Ezekiel, a whole community has died spiritually. The experience of exile, being forcibly moved to another land, has taken its toll, stripping away a sense of identity, leaving people to wonder whether they even count in God's sight. Depression has set in so that the community is like a heap of dry, brittle bones, without hope. Into that despair, into that death, God's word, through the prophet came as a life-giving breath, as a word of encouragement, as new life. And the bones took on sinew and began to dance!

John's story of Lazarus is not as poetic as the Ezekiel account, but it is no less dramatic. Here a family, close friends of Jesus, and surrounded by a community that has gathered to mourn, is in the deep despair of death. For Mary and Martha, hope went out the door when Jesus delayed in responding to their desperate plea that he come and keep their brother from dying. In a sense this story becomes a rehearsal of Jesus' own impending death, and within it we find several things that help us move from a place of life-to-death toward a place of death-to-life.

On Friday as I was working with this story, I had an email exchange with Pat Eliason. She was requesting that we continue to remember her former husband, Tesfaye, the father of her daughter Dee, who is back in Mayo for further tests because his pain from cancer is growing more acute. “It’s so difficult,” she wrote. And I couldn't think of a better description of the dark valley of impending death. It’s so difficult. There comes a time when there is nothing we can do but stand by and be present. We can't alleviate suffering; we can't remove all fear; we can't add more days. Mary and Martha, in separate exchanges with Jesus repeat the very same words of exasperation: “If only you had been here our brother wouldn't have died.” They wanted Jesus to keep them from the difficult time. All they could see was life ending in death.

It seems that Jesus delayed his arrival to show that death is not the end, that death does not have the last word. Before he arrived he spoke confidently with his disciples that this occasion would bring glory to God. They must have been a bit perplexed by that and we might wonder if this isn't a bit too much like the televangelists and faith healers who take advantage of someone's grief and loss for their own personal gain. When we hear the words “glory” or “God’s glory,” it sounds like something shiny and fantastic. But it’s important to keep in mind how the Gospel of John portrays this glory and the glorification of Jesus. In John's gospel, it is the crucifixion, the moment of Jesus’

death on the cross, when Jesus is glorified. Glory begins in the death and gives way to the resurrection. The writer is confident that death leads to life. Death is not the end; it is the beginning. Jesus is willing to enter conflict and face death because of this.

But this confidence, this death-to-life orientation doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't step into and experience the difficulty and the pain of dying. He moves from assuring Martha that he is the resurrection and the life and that her brother will live, to a moment of grief and weeping. He enters into the pain of the gathered community, even as he no doubt is anticipating the pain of his own death on the near horizon. For as John recounts the story, it is this act of bringing Lazarus back to life that sets in motion the wheels of opposition that will ultimately claim his own life.

The story ends by inviting the grieving spectators into participants of new life. Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb, but when he emerges, his grave clothes do not magically fall off and Jesus doesn't remove them with another powerful word. Instead he commands the family and friends to "unbind him and let him go." Moving from death to life isn't just a miracle of God; it takes our participation. We must trust in the resurrection, and in trusting take actions that build hope. By inviting the whole community into the action of unbinding Lazarus, Jesus was inviting everyone present to enter this moment of faith, of hope, of moving from death to life. He created a moment of hope, a moment his followers would take with them as they would follow him into the unknown.

You no doubt heard the stories from the community in Washington state that suffered the devastating landslide. One report recounted how families, after claiming a recovered body, would take a day to grieve, and then return to join the search effort to uncover others not yet found. They were participants in life after death.

Friday was the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Recently my son Gabe had the opportunity to interview with a federal district judge in Northern California who has had a long career developing and enforcing civil rights law. Judge Henderson worked in the south during the 1960s and got to know Dr. King. Gabe asked about his personal interactions and memories of Dr. King. Among other things, the judge said that Dr. King came to realize several years prior to his death, that the depth of opposition to his actions would likely lead to death. But the specter of death didn't stop him, nor did it shatter his Christian faith nor diminish his hope, even when those who opposed him also claimed to be Christians. Dr. King knew that Jesus was weeping for the cruel injustices in this country, as Jesus weeps for similar situations all around the world, and he continued to respond to the call: "unbind them and let them go." Even as he drew nearer to death, his vision of life, his dream of a day of equality only grew more intense.

Every day we are confronted with situations that leave us saying "It's so difficult." Even after our elders have lived a long, full life, it's hard to accept the final separation. Harder still when cancer or other illnesses or disability diminish those we love in a premature way. Climate change, economic disparities, the ever-growing concentration of wealth among a small group of extremely rich, and another Supreme Court ruling this week that equates free speech with money. We each have our own list of the things that leave us saying, "It's so difficult."

But each time we sigh and say those words, let them direct to other words. Let them be a reminder that "Jesus wept"—that he walked, and he walks, this path with us. Let them be a reminder that Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life," assuring us that there is hope, that there is life beyond the pain, beyond the death. Let us be a community that believes, that hopes, and that walks from death into life.