

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, yr. a, 3/29/2020  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-53  
Unbound – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

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Have you ever found yourself wondering - daydreaming – what it would be like to be somewhere else rather than where you find yourself? Or maybe what it would be like if you had made one or two different choices along the way – would things be different? Maybe we find ourselves thinking, “Hmm, what if I had a totally different job, or wouldn’t it be great to be on the beach right now instead of shoveling snow.” I think probably we all engage in this kind of daydreaming and wishful thinking at times. For me I find myself thinking this way in times of stress, worry, when I’m feeling pulled in many different directions. Daydreaming, indulging our imaginations for awhile, curling up with a good book and a cup of something hot, putting on some music, watching a movie – all these are ways we can be somewhere else for awhile rather than where we are.

But we can’t daydream forever. We can keep trying to put reality aside for awhile, but eventually we have to face reality – live where we are, not where we would like to be. Our daydreaming “what ifs” can, before we know it, become nightmare “what ifs” – shadowed by the worst that can happen rather than the best. And pretty soon we can find ourselves facing loss, hopelessness. The refrain of wondering “what if” becomes, “If only ... If only I ‘d done this ... if only I’d chosen that ... if only I’d said yes, ... if only I’d said no ... if only she’d done that ... if only I had been there ... if only he had been here.”

Now Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was sick. And the two sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is sick." When Jesus got the message he told his disciples that the sickness was not fatal, and would be an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son." So though he knew Lazarus was sick, he stayed two more days where he was. Then when Jesus and his disciples finally got there, he found Lazarus had already been dead four days. Martha heard Jesus was coming and she went out to meet him, and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you." And after she went and told her sister Mary that Jesus was here, Mary went to him, throwing herself at his feet, saying, "Lord, if only you had been here my brother wouldn't have died."

"If only ..." Martha and Mary loved Jesus, and Jesus loved them and their brother Lazarus. They had great faith in Jesus and who Jesus is. Yet they both found themselves in this "if only" place.

How much – how often - is our faith based more on wishful thinking rather than total trust? Sometimes I catch myself – usually when its way after the fact – thinking of my faith as a kind of magic. If I believe strongly enough, if I hope hard enough, pray hard enough, if I crawl on my hands and knees and fall at Jesus' feet, everything will turn out all right. And odds are in some fashion, in the long run it does all turn out alright. But is that really faith? Or is it more a matter of

luck, circumstance, the family I was born into, the stars favorably aligned, being in the right place at the right time and with the right people?

If my faith in God, my believing myself to be a child of God, forgiven and saved by grace, is like this, then what about all those who are “less fortunate” than me? What about those for whom things don’t turn out alright? Does God look on them with less favor than on me? Why?

I don’t know – faith in God’s promised kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, faith found in some being saved by faith while others are not, just doesn’t seem to be good enough for me if God is really God. Possessed by grief, shock, anger, even sometimes possessed by despair or cynicism, I can find myself, along with Martha and Mary and those around them, coming to Jesus saying, “If you had been here this wouldn’t have happened.”

When Jesus saw Mary, with all her friends and neighbors, weeping, he was greatly agitated in spirit and deeply moved. “Where have you put him?” He asked. “Lord, come and see,” they answered. Jesus wept.

Thank God! ... Jesus weeps! If he hadn’t, I just might have closed up my Bible when I was younger and never open it again. Earlier in the gospel of John it seems as if Jesus is above it all, speaking of his own death as the culmination of his life and God’s plan for salvation, as a triumph and vindication for his

followers, like the end of a good story with a happy ending. And the disciples seem to latch onto this “everybody lived happily ever after” approach to faith and discipleship. It’s an approach much like our times of daydreaming and wishful thinking that works for awhile, until ... until we find ourselves running to God in pain and grief and anger and anguish saying, “If only you had been here ...” And Jesus weeps. Here – here is real life, not fiction.

With the psalmist we cry: “Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord. Hear our voice! We wait for the Lord, our souls wait.” (Ps. 130) And in the midst of those depths from which we cry, God weeps. Jesus weeps – weeps with Mary, weeps in the face of death, in the midst of the empty void of loss when who we love and what we love dies, weeps with the pain, and betrayal, and confusion, and remorse his own death will cause even as it brings resurrection. Jesus weeps that even as there are those who come to faith through him, even after he has called out, “unbind him and let him go”, there are those who harden their hearts in the face of such an unbinding of their own wishful thinking.

It is so hard to unbind our wishful thinking approach to life from our faith. Many who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believe in him. But some went to the chief priests and the Pharisees and they called a meeting of the council to try and stop Jesus, resolving to put him to death, because his acts of salvation threatened to overturn their own wishful thinking – the fiction by which they lived and believed, in which they pretended to be safe and blessed.

But Jesus doesn't back down. Jesus weeps –with them and us, for them and us, and in the face of all that would crush and destroy.

Jesus weeps and goes through death with the spirit of life, and calls us out of the tombs, out of the graveyards in which we find ourselves and others, telling us in the words of Ezekiel: I am going to open your tombs and raise you up from your tombs, O my people ... I will put my spirit in you and you shall live.”

According to ancient Christian tradition and teaching, after Jesus' death on the cross, but before his resurrection, Jesus descended into Hell. As a kid it was mind-boggling to me that Jesus went to hell. The tradition teaches that by going to hell, Christ Jesus redeems; brings the resurrection promise to all who are separated from the love and presence of God. In a very old church in Istanbul, Turkey – a place visited by Paul – there is an enormous fresco painted on the ceiling above the altar. It is a painting of Jesus “descending into hell.” With one strong hand he is grasping Adam and with the other Eve. And he is pulling them – with great force wrestling them - out of hell with him. The gates of hell, which he has trampled down under his feet, are in the form of the cross on which he was put to death.

It is very hard for us, in the midst of the valley of dry bones, the valley of the shadow of death, to sit and wait at the open grave of our old ways and our old selves, to understand and to accept that life comes out of death. Most of the

time I think I would rather God grant me a life free of pain and suffering – and most of the time that is what I strive for with all my might. I want God to rescue me from death not accompany me through it.

But that is not what God offers us. It's not what God promises us. God in Christ Jesus faces death, stands toe to toe with all that is death in this world. He does not dance around it or avoid it. He creates life in the midst of grief, love in the midst of loss, creating joy in the midst of despair, and faith in the midst of betrayal and injustice. By God's own example in Jesus Christ, God grabs us by the arm or anything God can get a grip on, and takes us by the only real road to Easter morning, and that is through Good Friday. Amen.

