

Lent 5 A 2011

Texts: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11: 1-45

“Unbind him, and let him go!” John 11: 44

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

**I listen to a program on my computer every Sunday when I come in to write my sermon. It is called Sing for Joy and it comes from St. Olaf College in Minnesota. If you have never heard the program, it is worth getting up early to listen to. It is on at 6 a.m. at Classic99.com. One of the reasons I come in so early on Sunday's is to listen to this program in the quietness of the early morning. It always blesses me.**

**This morning the very last piece of music played was the hymn Abide with Me. It is number 662 in our hymnal if you want to look at it. It was sung by the men and boys choirs of St. Thomas Church in Manhattan. It moved my soul.**

**This hymn is often sung at funerals, but it is not a hymn of the grave or of grief, but of deep belief. It is written in the first person and it has a depth and an intensely personal feel to it. The hymn asks God to be constantly present, to not leave as difficulties and death approaches.**

**I would like to read you the first verse:**

**Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide: when other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me.**

**We need to sing this hymn more often than just at funerals. We need to sing this hymn to be reminded in the midst of our lives what it means to have a God that helps us when all else fails, a God who is the help of the helpless and the hope of the hopeless.**

**These words could have been on the lips of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. The story of the death and raising of Lazarus is so intensely personal and poignant. And it shines with words of deep belief even as it mourns the dying of a beloved brother and friend.**

**Help of the helpless. Can't you just picture the professional mourners weeping and wailing over Lazarus' death, trying to "help" Martha and Mary grieve the loss of their brother? But how much "help" was that, really? Martha and Mary were literally helpless to do anything about the death of their brother.**

**And so, Martha and Mary send for Jesus. When Martha hears that Jesus is finally on his way she goes out to meet him and when she meets up with him she utters words that some take as a rebuke, and others take as a statement of deep faith. Perhaps they are both.**

**"Lord, had you been here, my brother would not have died, but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."**

**Jesus' help comes in the words he then spoke to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."**

**Notice that Jesus didn't say to Martha, "I am life and resurrection." Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the life."**

**Resurrection always comes before life and for a very specific reason; Jesus wants us to know that for us to have life, true and eternal life, we must die first. There can be no resurrection without it.**

**We must not only die physically, we must also die to all those things that bind us and keep us from loving God fully and completely here and now. We must die to all those things that keep us focused on ourselves and our needs rather than being focused on others and their needs.**

**There is only one way we can leave the tomb of self-centeredness and that is to have Jesus call us out of the tomb and into the light of giving our lives to God and serving one another.**

**Our culture tells us that we live now; that the present is all that matters and then we die. Where is the help and hope in that?**

**Our faith tells us that our life, our eternal life, reaches back into the past, lives through the present and guides us into the future. This view is very different from what our culture teaches.**

**Our faith tells us and shows us that Jesus was not just some man that lived 2000 years ago, but that he is God in the flesh, available and accessible to humanity not only back then but right now and not only now but in the age to come.**

**Our faith in God and Jesus tells us that our hope and our help reside in them and them alone.**

**Jesus gives life back to Lazarus and Jesus will die as a result. Jesus gives help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless and is nailed to a tree by the Roman's and religious leaders to be made an example of. The message is clear, giving help to the helpless and hope to the hopeless just isn't done. When you do so, you can expect the same treatment.**

**There is another example being shown, however. Jesus' message in his life and in his death is that giving help and hope is exactly what we are supposed to be about. And we do it in his name.**

**When Jesus raises Lazarus he tells those assembled, "Unbind him, and let him go!" It was the community that was gathered that was given this task. Jesus gave Lazarus new life, but it was their job to take the wrappings off of him and to set him free.**

**It is the same task we are given to do. Jesus raises from the dead, gives help and hope to all those that are crushed under the weight of the world and then tells us to unbind them and to set them free.**

**We do so knowing it will not be easy and that we may face difficulties as a result. We do so knowing that those we counted on may flee or even turn against us. But we also do so knowing that it forces us to leave the tomb of self-centeredness and enter the light of Jesus' life and love and service.**

**And as we live in Jesus, and love in Jesus and serve in Jesus, we will find out that we are the ones being unbound.**

**Amen.**