
WORD MADE FLESH

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Ezekiel 37:12-14; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

The Swaddling Cloths of Death*

Lent deepens. Through today's readings we move closer to the contemplation of Jesus' crucifixion and death. We are called by the fiery prophet Ezekiel and the Apostles Paul and John to consider the grave and death. What is their spiritual meaning? How is the grave and death at work in our lives?

Ezekiel sketches for us the character of a life shrouded in death. He talks of the people living in exile from their own land, without the possibility of putting roots deep into their own soil. A life of death - a graven life - is one in which the person is estranged from the ground of his or her own being. Instead of growing daily out of one's created nature and being able to engage the struggles proper to it, one's created nature has been replaced with a false image of who one is. Death is the spiritual condition of having one's life colonized by nostalgia, utopian dreaming or the foreign soil of another's virtue, to use Ezekiel's metaphor. All of them deaden our created being.

"I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people, ... place you on your own soil." The resurrection is the work of God in our life. The resurrection restores us to the ground of our own being, restores our God given life to us.

I first glimpsed the meaning of today's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus over a breakfast table in the midst of a confrontation between a young woman seeking to strike out on her own - to find her own ground - and her loving parents. Her parents were certain their plan for her life was virtuous, right, the only way her life was going to unfold.

The parents had served as missionaries for many years in Africa and on this spring morning an African minister sat at their table, a man who had come to himself, to Christ, through their work many years before. The confrontation between the parents and the beloved daughter grew with each moment as scripture, virtue and moral precept were cited to counter the daughter's intention to seek her own ground. Morality, alas, is often used by those with authority to deprive others of the soil of their own life. The African minister, at the table of a family so important and precious to him, was asked to respond to this standoff. The words of today's Gospel, the simple words, "unbind her, and let her go free," spoken with compassion and reverence illumined that dark breakfast table that morning.

Resurrection, the calling of life from death, is not a historical incident in the life of God. Resurrection happens over every breakfast table when a servant of God expresses God's faithfulness in the human journey. It occurs when the Spirit of God dwells in us and we call for the stone to be rolled away from the burial ground of a person's world. Resurrection occurs when we unbind our fellow human beings from the swaddling cloths of death. The swaddling cloths of death come from what St. Paul calls "the flesh" in today's

reading. The flesh is all those passions - pride being the chief passion of the virtuous - which tie life in knots and rob a person of faith in the life at the heart of God's creation and confidence.

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