



THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

For thousands of years, indigenous people have walked on this land, in their own country. Caring for the land is at the centre of their lives. With respect and gratitude we acknowledge the Darug people and their stewardship of this land throughout the ages.

[You might like to light a few candles]

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We have been in the wilderness—

All: Discerning and learning, creating new ways to be your church.

One: We have been in the wilderness—

All: Grieving and wondering, praying and hoping.

One: We have been in the wilderness—

All: Longing and waiting, wondering: how long?

One: We have been in the wilderness, but we have not been alone;
for God walks with us, every step of the way.

All: So let us worship the God of our darkest nights and our brightest days.

One: Let us worship God.

SONG: 'O Holy One'

LENTEN CANDLE MEDITATION:

Normally the church would be full of the sounds of friends greeting each other, welcomers preparing our space, children sharing their energy and enthusiasm. Now we are sitting apart.

Wherever you are at in this moment..

I invite you to close your eyes . . . bring your attention to your breathing.... Slow down... become still....and consider the word, "sanctuary."

A sanctuary is a place set aside for sacred things. It is a place of refuge and protection. Our church is a sanctuary... Our homes are also sanctuary.

The season of Lent is a kind of sanctuary, extended in time. And one of the things Lent teaches- is that you, too, are a sanctuary.

There is inside you a place for sacred things, a place where God abides.

(Silent time.)

As we extinguish this light, we acknowledge the darkness and pain of sickness and unemployment in the world.

(A candle is extinguished.)

Let us pray:

Loving God, we open our hearts to you. We invite you into our inmost being, only to find you already there. Strengthen us in our quiet places and then lead us into the work of justice and peace. Amen.

SONG: Oh Tender God of Mercy

PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Gracious God,

You invite us to plant a garden of love and harmony, but too often we grow weeds of prejudice and hatred. You invite us to sow joy and gratitude, but we scatter seeds of greed and envy. You call us to tend the soil of fear and denial, but instead we close our eyes and let the earth suffer. Forgive us.

You invited us to plant a garden, and we lost ourselves in the wilderness.

Clear our hearts. Breathe life into these weary bones and grant us a fresh start.

Gratefully we pray, Amen.

SONG: Open Unto Me

WILDERNESS POEM: THE WILDERNESS IS A PLACE OF LIFE - RESILIENT LIFE

[written by Sarah Are, adapted by Ellie]

I used to think the wilderness would never end.

I called my mom and asked—

“Does time really heal all wounds?

Do the pieces ever fall back into place?

Does the wilderness go on forever?”

So she told me about the horizon. She said, “There is an edge, Where the earth meets the sky. And when you’re there,

You will see daisies in the sidewalk And the sun after the rain.”

I asked her to draw me a map

And she cried,

Because she knew this road was mine to walk, But she promised to wait for me, Day in and day out,

For as long as the wilderness raged.

So I walked.

And it felt like forty days and it hurt like forty nights.

And I waved to the people I passed there in the wilderness.

We tipped our hats to one another, Silently recognizing the weight we each carried,

Until one day, I realized—

The earth always kisses the sky.

And this wilderness has turned into a garden, And I have made it out alive.

And my mother hugged me, There at the earth's edge. And she whispered in my ear,
That God was that gardener, And that I had nothing to fear.
So if you ever ask for a map,
Know that God and I will be planting seeds, Hoping to turn your wilderness into a garden.
For as long as the wilderness rages on, I will never stop looking for you
Where the earth kisses the sky.

SONG: In My Heart is the Road

GROWING FAITH TOGETHER - This week write or make your own 'Thinking of You!' card or letter and send it to someone(s)

SONG: You are Slow

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 37:1-14

SERMON: ' Can the dead be raised?' By Rev Russell Davis

I love the story of the valley of the dead, dry bones. It seems to be a very popular spot to spend time in. Not the *physical* location, in the valley of the River Chebar, but the *spiritual* location, the valley of despair and hopelessness. Throughout this season of Lent we're calling that place 'the wilderness,' but it's the same spiritual location that Ezekiel was describing. Most of the people I know seem to spend a lot of time there.

The people of Israel were in captivity in Babylon. They felt lost and abandoned by God. They felt hopeless and despairing; their glories were all behind them; only death and failure lay ahead. Many parishes feel *exactly* like that, and we've visited that valley ourselves. Until last week I would have confidently said that we've come *through* it, and are exploring the green pastures beyond.

However, the corona virus and government response to it have thrown us right back into the valley of turmoil. Being unable to gather as a community for up to six months — maybe even longer! We've never had to face anything quite like this before, and it will take all our imagination, all our resolve and all our faith to come through it. Though last Sunday was a truly wonderful start.

It doesn't necessarily help to reflect *too much* on the costly issues of the past. In a previous parish I was running a parish planning day. I was writing up on butchers paper answers to the question, "What crises have we faced in the past?" The session was designed to show that the parish had faced and conquered bigger crises than the one facing them at that moment. It was designed to give them *hope and confidence* to face the future. But it backfired. All the people would talk about was the crises which had *weakened* them, and the more they talked, the

weaker they *felt*. So let's not fall into *that* trap.

In Glenbrook I reckon we're in the blessed position that we can not only look back over occasional visits to the valley of the dead, dry bones and share the despair of the people of Israel, but we can also look back at how God breathed his *Spirit* on the bones, breathed new life into us, filled us with life and hope. We've seen *both* sides of that divine equation, and we know that God *can* bring new life. We've seen and *experienced* it, so we dare to hope she'll do it again.

But Ezekiel, at the start of the story, didn't have that benefit. He was called to look out over the bones, to see the human perspective of despair, and to proclaim the divine perspective of new life. He was called on to proclaim it without any evidence, on the strength of God's promise, in faith that God would keep his promise.

How do you think Ezekiel would feel, preaching to the bones? Like a fool! But he did it, and God fulfilled his promise. The Spirit filled them; they came to life; God was glorified and they were resurrected. That promise still stands. Let the preacher preach, and let the people live!

I left the reading of the Gospel till now, so that we could hear it in that context, because John's account of the raising of Lazarus is as mysterious as the dead, dry bones — just as full of symbolism, and just as relevant to today.

GOSPLE READINGS: John 11:1-45

This story has five scenes:

- 1) Mary and Martha send the message of Lazarus' sickness to Jesus.
- 2) Two days later, he goes to Bethany, and finds Lazarus dead and buried.
- 3) He has a conversation with Martha.
- 4) He has a conversation with Mary.
- 5) He raises Lazarus from the dead.

Who is the central figure in the story? We'd almost inevitably say, "Lazarus!" But John would tell us we're wrong. As always in John's gospel, *Jesus* is the focus. It's all about his reactions and purpose.

According to John, this was the incident which finally provoked the chief priests and the pharisees to seek Jesus' death. It was the last straw. Yet none of the other gospels mention it at all, and even John never mentions Lazarus again. Don't you find that strange?

If Lazarus were the focus, you'd expect him to turn up in the Book of Acts as a great proof of the power of Jesus, yet he never appears again, and that's a great mystery in biblical interpretation... *If Lazarus is the focus...*

So let's look at *John's* focus, and see what he's telling us about Jesus in these five

scenes.

Scene 1) Mary and Martha send the message to Jesus about Lazarus' sickness. They don't *ask* him to come; they *trust* him to meet their need — after all, the gospel itself records that Jesus loved all three members of the family. Yet he hangs about for two days. That's a real puzzle, and I've never found a satisfactory answer to it. The most popular explanation among preachers I've heard is that Jesus delayed until he could be sure that Lazarus was absolutely stone cold dead, so that raising him to life would demonstrate Jesus power and glory. Personally I don't buy that. The Jesus I know would have been more concerned to support the two sisters' grief than to demonstrate his power and glory. So it is a puzzle.

At the very least, John is telling us that Jesus doesn't always come at the time or in the way that we expect or ask. He acts on his own initiative, not on our pressure. Yet, as we'll see, when he *does* act, he does *more* than we expect, not less.

Scene 2) Jesus decides to go to Bethany. The disciples are despairing, because they know he is going to his death. But Jesus persists. He *chooses* to go to Jerusalem to face death. He sees it as his glory. Thomas says with stoic courage, "Let us go too, that we may die with him." That's why Thomas is my favourite disciple. They slander him with the title 'the Doubter,' but when the chips are down, Thomas is always ready to put his money where his mouth is.

Are we ready to go with him, *wherever* he calls us, and *whenever* he calls us, and *however* he calls us? It may not be when and where and how we would like. It may involve great risk, or even danger. Are we ready to follow? He won't force us. But if we choose *not* to follow, Jesus will go on his way *anyway*, and we will be left behind. That's not a threat, but it is a very serious warning we'd be wise to take on board.

Scene 3) He gets to Bethany and finds Lazarus dead. Martha says to him, "If you'd been here, my brother would not have died. Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

There's a mixture of faith and accusation there. It's very honest, and I admire both parts of her reaction. But she misses the theological point somewhat, as many contemporary Christians are also prone to do. Jesus starts to speak about resurrection, and she says, "Oh yes, I believe in the *final* resurrection." Martha trusts God in the final analysis, but she doesn't expect a miracle *now*. She's like the people who turned up for a prayer meeting to pray for rain, and the minister sent them back home, because not *one* of them was carrying an umbrella!

Jesus promises her that it's *now* that God will act. Do you expect God to act to give us the new life and faith we need to see us through the wilderness? We *all* expect God will triumph in the *end*. But do you expect him to triumph *here* and *now*?

That's probably the most important question in this sermon. So many Christians put

their hope either in the Second Coming of Christ to resolve all the world's problems, or in the promise of life in heaven if we die before the Second Coming. That's actually a *travesty* of the biblical hope. When John talks about eternal life, he isn't describing what happens after we die, but about the rich, loving experience of life here and now through the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised it to Martha before he even died, and he promises it to us today. Life after death, yes, I live in hope for it. But life here and now is what Jesus promises.

Scene 4) Jesus gets into conversation with Mary. Like Martha, she says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And she weeps in grief for her dead brother. Again, I really admire the honesty of those two sisters. They trust him with their hurt and disappointment as well as with their grief. Jesus is deeply moved by the grief of his friends. He *always* suffers along with us. He shares our griefs and sorrows, and is just as concerned to bring us through them to hope and victory.

Scene 5) He raises Lazarus. This is an incredible scene, with the dead man, wrapped in burial clothes, coming out of the tomb.

The Jews believed that after four days the spirit stopped hanging around. Lazarus was seen to be well and truly *dead*. There was no possibility of it being a faint or swoon; he was *stone cold dead*. That's the traditional explanation for Jesus' delayed coming, so that there would be no doubt about it. Lazarus was really dead, and Jesus raised him to life; the ultimate miracle.

About 40 years ago, at a ministers' seminar, Professor Paul Trudinger from Adelaide was giving a series of lectures on John's Gospel, and I still remember them. I asked him *why* Lazarus is not mentioned again. "You're like Mary and Martha," he said. "You want to stand *outside* the story and *analyse* it. You can't make this an example of the doctrine of the resurrection. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he was still mortal. Eventually he grew old and died a natural death. We don't know what happened to him.

"But that's not the point," Trudinger went on. "The key question *isn't* whether Jesus raised Lazarus in 30AD. The question is whether he is *still* the resurrection and the life. Does he *still* raise the dead? Is there life in *you*? Is there life in the *church*? Is there life in your *parish*? It's not an encounter in the *past*. Do you expect new life in Jesus *today*? ...even if he doesn't come on the day you call or the way you expect? Do you live today in the faith of the resurrection?"

You can see how deeply the questions hit me, that I'm still able to quote Trudinger so many years later. (Mind you, there's a reason for that. I've quoted him once every three years since 1981 when this passage appears in the lectionary.) And he's *right*. Those are the questions. What do you say?

For myself, Yes, I *do* believe he is still the resurrection and the life. Yes, I *do* expect new life in Jesus today, for myself, for the church, for this parish. It's what keeps me going when I find myself in the valley of the dead, dry bones, or when I'm brought

face to face with the dead body in the grave.

I suspect, however, that this new life won't be the same as we've experienced in the past. When God does a new thing, it's a *really* new thing, not just a rehash of the past. The point is that it will be *more* than we expect, not *less* than we expect. I *liked* the past; as I get older I don't *enjoy* change. But I see God doing a new thing in us and for us, and I'd rather be part of *that* than be left behind.

Jesus is *still* the resurrection and the life. His promises still stand, and his power still stands. God is waiting to breathe new life into us and fill us with his Spirit. Like Lazarus, let's take off the bandages that bind us, and the cloth that covers our faces, and go out in faith to join him in the new life which is his gift, today and always, here and now and everywhere.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SONG: Hidden with Christ

OFFERING OUR GIFTS:

Even when we are separated from one another and from our usual practice of worship, we need to continue to support the life of our church. If you are not already part of 'Giving Direct' please consider doing this. You can also transfer online or in person at a Westpac branch by depositing into the St Andrews account

BSB 634 634

ACC:100030278

or post a cheque to St Andrews Uniting Church Glenbrook

PO Box 54, Glenbrook 2773.

SONG: With Grateful Hearts

One: For all we receive and all we give, we are grateful.

Many: Whether we are giving or receiving, we belong to Christ.

A PRAYER FOR DISPERSAL written by Rev. Ann Hosking Perrin [adapted]

Ever-living, ever-present God,

You are with us.

We come before you this day
knowing we are always called to be dispersed,
sent out into your world
to be your church
to be your church in ways we never before imagined.

If we are resistant to this change Lord,
hear our prayer of confession

and bless us with forgiveness,
 patience and resilience
 for we are committed to care for each other as we care for ourselves.

So help us to discover new ways to share why we live our lives committed to sharing the promises of the gospel.

During this time of upheaval, we will remember those groups from our community who usually meet in our church building that is not longer available to them. For their loss of employment and income - we grieve with them. For the challenging of finding new ways to be a community of support, accountability and care - we stand with them.

We remember planned baptisms and weddings which are not postponed, And pray times for rejoicing will not be too far away.

We remember those for whom this time is one of uncertainty and challenge those who now live with fear and in isolation, and those for whom this time is one of anguish and death. Hold all those in need of your love at this time.

Holy God, you encourage us when we are doubtful to draw closer to you. Allow us to recognise your Holy Spirit as our guide, comforter, and companion.

And so with the hope you instil in us
 and when the time is right and this season of our church is over
 we will return as your gathered community
 with the joy of Easter Day,
 celebrating our resilience, knowing our communities are stronger then ever
 to continue your work to help build a flourishing world where ever we find ourselves.

Amen

SONG: Hear my cry, O God.

BLESSING

**Crucified and Risen One,
 You have chosen us and we have chosen you
 May this way of choosing become a way
 of knowing, loving and living
 that knows no end
 Amen.**

Song: 'Holy One, Now Let your Servants go in peace'