

Illuminations – Fifth Sunday in Lent

First Reading: Ezekiel

(37:1-14)

Suddenly much of Lent is behind us. Holy Week is next Sunday, and Easter is drawing near. Our readings for the Fifth Sunday in Lent begin to tantalize our spirits with promises of victory over death through resurrection. Last week we walked with God through the valley of the shadow of death. Now we will remember the prophet Ezekiel's vision of another valley, this one full of dry bones. We aren't told if this eerie and frightening sight was the scene of a battle or a massacre. But through God's power and Ezekiel's prophecy, the dry bones are restored to life, revealing God's promise to restore Israel from exile to its own land.

Psalm 130

Psalm 130, familiarly known as "De Profundis" ("out of the depths"), is one of the half-dozen psalms explicitly suggested for use in the liturgy for the burial of the dead. Its solemn cadences remind us that even when we are lost in deep grief, pain, and despair, our souls wait in hope for God's love and grace. Even in death, we await the resurrection. We wait "more than watchmen for the morning," the Psalmist sings, as in night's darkest hours we watch for the first morning light.

Second Reading: Romans

(8:6-11)

The short passage from Romans affords us a quick look at Paul's evolving understanding of the difference between flesh and spirit. All of us live our lives in human flesh, Paul said; even Jesus, who was just as fully human as we are. But Paul recognizes flesh as subject to death and thus, he believes, ultimately displeasing to God. Conversely, he muses, the spirit of God living in us leads us to eternal life through righteousness. When we accept God's spirit dwelling within us through the action of Jesus, Paul says, we gain the hope of life, peace, and resurrection.

Gospel: John

(11:1-45)

John's Gospel tells this familiar story of Jesus's dear friends, Mary and Martha, devastated by the death of their brother Lazarus. Each of them confronts Jesus in turn with the words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." To bold, brash Martha, Jesus utters the Messianic statement, "I am the resurrection and the life. ... everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then, when he sees quiet Mary crying, Jesus simply weeps with her. And then he calls Lazarus back from death. But there's more to this story. Jesus thanks God that the amazed crowd that witnessed Lazarus rising will now believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The verses that come after this reading, though, take an ominous turn that leads to the Passion and the Cross: The temple authorities, fearful about the uproar that Jesus is causing, decide that he must die.