

Sermon, March 29, 2020
“River of Suffering, Boat of Love”

It is a time of much suffering in our world. There is Physical Suffering, so obvious with this virus and respiratory illness. There is Mental Suffering that is prevalent: anxiety and fear directs many of our actions. And there is Spiritual Suffering, when our anxieties become despair and lack of faith, hope, and love.

Can we find any help from holy scriptures? The prophets were masters of poetic images. In our story from Ezekiel Chapter 37 this morning (which is probably being heard by the majority of churches this morning), we hear of his famous vision of the “Valley of Dry Bones.” We are not meant to think that Ezekiel saw an actual valley one day walking outside. No, the prophets, in times of meditation or prayer had “visions:” images and words that came to them. And the hearers of that day would not take them literally, but metaphorically, knowing the power of image and symbol. I recall one of our professors at Princeton once giving a lecture on how all language about God is necessarily metaphorical.

The words Ezekiel hears from the Spirit are, “Can these bones live?” I am reminded of the saying that a body without a spirit is a corpse. (And surely if we have no faith, hope, or love, we are walking around a bit like “death warmed over”). The metaphor also has particular relevance for our travel lives: airports with many airplanes grounded have been referred to as “boneyards.” Sounds like The Valley of Dry Bones. Can these bones live? Will these airplanes fly?

It IS a time of Death; Numbers of deaths are on the rise. It IS a time of Anxiety and Fear; we ask about so many things. Can these bones live? Are there enough respirators and masks? Do I need to wear gloves to the grocery store? Or wash all my fruits with soap and water? Will there be a drug or vaccine any time soon?

So we also look for signs of new life...SPRING is a natural elixir. Birds have returned, flowers begin to bloom. People are beginning to work in their gardens.

MUSIC is everywhere to comfort us; Ken Medema has done some living room concerts on his Facebook page. Elton John is doing a fund raiser tonight at 9pm. My brother even emailed recordings of himself playing hymns on the trombone!

STORIES of self-giving abound. One 72 year old priest in Italy gave his respirator to younger people in a hospital, saying "I've had a good life, give this to someone who has more life ahead of them," then he died a few days later.

PROJECTS, for sure! We all are getting creative with "home projects." Puzzles, Reading (and I recommend some spiritual books!) Cleaning and Organizing projects. And of course more contacts with friends and family via computer or telephone (we can actually "talk" on these hand held devices!)

Some people, perhaps the less extroverted types, have actually said they are finding much blessing in the "stay home" mandates. More time for creative projects, more time with family members. The extroverts and social butterflies also may find silver linings in the cloud... time to turn inward, time with one's deeper self, which may be closely connect to time with God. I've heard from several people that their dogs are getting much more exercise! One joke even has a dog up on a table complaining, "not another walk!"

I'd like to turn to the deeper spiritual opportunities in all this. In our Hebrew scripture, the prophet Ezekiel sees the bones connecting with each other, sinews and ligaments coming together, but still no movement or life. The Spirit tell Ezekiel to prophesy to The Breath, "Come from the four winds, O Breath!"

Ezekiel realized or saw that what really gives life to our bones is really the Holy Spirit, which is also translated as Wind or Breath (Pneuma). It is no wonder that most of our Yoga classes and Meditation instruction points to the most basic meditation, focusing on our Breath! Teachers

focus on our breath, as both a way to let go, letting it get slower and longer, and also as a way to energize the body with more rapid forceful breathing (no comments from the peanut gallery!)

Jesus himself must have practiced various forms of meditation, since the scriptures often say that he “went away to a lonely place,” often early in the morning. Quietness, solitary time for prayer/meditation. But in this morning’s gospel story about the raising of Lazarus (John 11), a key factor to Jesus’ power is that he felt such compassion (LOVE) for Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he also was moved to tears, so much so that onlookers said, “See how much Jesus loved him!” That compassion and love somehow helped Lazarus to be raised. Somehow it worked together with God’s spirit and Lazarus’ spirit to bring to bring him back to life! Jesus’ tears were actually tears of LOVE that could also “move” Lazarus. When we say we are “moved,” it shows there is physical power in strong feelings.

So I finally get to the title of this sermon: “River of Suffering, Boat of Love.” It comes from John of the Cross, a mystic in 16th Century Spain. He, like Ezekiel, had a vision as follows: “I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of that river was Suffering; and I saw a boat which carries souls across the river, and the name of that boat was Love.” Suffering is upon us. And the only way to safely navigate it is through Love.

This coronavirus time can be a time of deepening our spiritual life.... A time of getting in touch with our common suffering, with the universal tears of this life. And of getting in touch with deep empathy, deep compassion, with the love that is true power and healing. It is a time to let that love even be forgiving (I heard that a U.N. leader has begun to call for cease fires, to stop killing each other since a deadly virus is already doing that!) Can we stop attacking one another (both in familiar and neighborly relations and perhaps in partisan divisions). This actually can be a time of practicing kindness and goodness, versus taking our pain out on others. And it DOES take practice! We can actually

“develop” inner attitudes of peacefulness, kindness, goodness and love, towards others in the same boat.

We ARE all in the same River of Suffering these days. So let's be in the same Boat of Love that Jesus demonstrated so well. The Love that casts out fear, the Peace that can calm the storm. We can start with our Breath (“Come, O Breath, from the four winds.” Come, Gratitude and love for our very life... Breathe in the Spirit of goodness, mercy, love, life! Breathe out frustration, anxiety and fear. Sit quietly with self-compassion, self-love, and love for others. And let tears for self or others carry us across this river of viral infections in a boat of compassion whose name is LOVE.