

Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent: April 10, 2011
Romans 8:6-11; Valley of the Dry Bones; The Raising of Lazarus
St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida
Preacher: The Rev. Jennie Lou D. Reid+

*Mighty victor from on high, hell's fierce powers beneath thee lie;
thou hast conquered in the fight, thou hast brought us life and light:
now no more can death appall, now no more the grave enthrall;
thou hast opened paradise, and in thee thy saints shall rise.ⁱ Amen.*

Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, began as a theological seminary, founded in 1824 by Bishop Philander Chase to prepare young men for the priesthood, when what is now the State of Ohio seemed like a western wilderness. In the Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit at the center of the campus is a window celebrating the martyrdom of Stephen the Deacon. Included in the window is the last sentence of the Biblical account of this event in the Acts of the Apostles, taken from the English Bible text available in the 19th century: the King James Version: "And [Stephen] kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." The text served as an amusing inspiration to seminarians who enjoyed napping beneath this window during long sermons!

Perhaps this literal translation of the original Greek text gives us a glimpse of the human aversion to saying aloud the word *death*. Perhaps like the Londoners who only whispered the name of the villain Bill Sikes in Dickens' tale *Oliver Twist* or the

students and faculty of Hogwarts who avoid speaking the name of wicked, cruel *Lord Voldemort* in Rawlings' Harry Potter novels, we fear that saying aloud the word *death* will cause distress or perhaps even serve as a curse on the speaker. Death is so terrifying, so evil, so unsettling a concept that we have created a web of alternative euphemisms to express the idea. Caribbean folks are likely to say that a person "has passed." Others may say, "we lost her." In the 1930's people said of pilots whose airplanes crashed in a farm that they had "bought the ranch" – a reference to the financial liability of their estate for damage to the farmer's crop. In the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Evelyn Crouch makes regular visits to Ninny Threadgood in a nursing home. One day when she cannot find Ninny, she asks the nurse where the resident is. The nurse says, "She's gone home." Evelyn becomes distraught. This dialogue follows:

Nurse: I'd thought you'd be happy for Miz. Threadgood.

Evelyn Couch: [*Crying and very upset*] Happy? Cuz she's dead?

Nurse: No that she gets to go home. She just left in a yellow cab.

Evelyn Couch: [*Looking VERY confused*] I don't understand...

Nurse: Well, there was really no point in her staying here now that Mrs. Otis died...

Evelyn Couch: [*Wide eyed*] Mrs. OTIS died?

Nurse: Well yes.

Evelyn Couch: Mrs Otis died! [*hopping around laughing*]

Evelyn Couch: Mrs. Otis died! [*catches herself*]

Evelyn Couch: Not that I'm happy that Mrs. Otis is dead.

Birth and death mark the bookends of a human life on this earth. This is the pattern established by God in Creation. We think we do not like this pattern. We want life to continue indefinitely, just as we know it. We do not want to be separated from those we love. We refuse to talk about it.

But Holy Scripture addresses death head-on in a variety of ways. Today's lessons include two snapshots. In the Old Testament Lesson God gives the Prophet Ezekiel a vision of the dead restored to life. In the vision Ezekiel sees a desolate valley full of "dry bones." By *dry*, Ezekiel means there is not an ounce of life left, even in the bare bones. These bones remind me of the melodramatic image the dog Snoopy paints as he imagines his owner Charlie Brown finding him expired because his supper did not arrive in time: "There will be nothing left but the dried carcass of his former friend who used to love to run and play so happily with him. Nothing left but the bleached puppy bones..." In Ezekiel's vision the breath of God stirs the bones and Ezekiel sees the reverse of the process of rotting as the bones reconnect to each other, take on flesh and then skin, and finally receive the breath of life. The vision is a sign that God will restore the nations of Israel and Judah in their homeland. There is more than one kind of death and of renewal.

The Gospel Lesson is John's account of Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead. This is the pinnacle of the signs that Jesus is Son of God. In the early verses Jesus

tells his disciples that Lazarus has “fallen asleep” – a euphemism that initially confuses them. The fact that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days is significant because Jesus’ contemporaries believed that death was irreversible at this point. Lazarus is dead as a doornail. Resuscitation is no longer possible. Martha echoes this belief when she objects to Jesus’ instruction to remove the stone covering the tomb, by pointing out, “There will be a stench.” As a result Jesus’ miracle of raising Lazarus reveals the power and mercy of God, working through Jesus.

Our short New Testament lesson from Paul’s Letter to the Romans offers a feast for thought. Those of you who have been reading the Daily Office material recently can place these verses into the wider context of Paul’s discussion of the competing notions of law and grace, and of the frailty of the flesh and the strength of the divine spark within. Paul writes, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” **To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace**, Paul claims. What is your experience? Even though we are bombarded by distractions, I believe we have the power to choose where we will focus our attention, but we have to make a conscious decision regarding who or what we will trust.

When Paul speaks of the flesh, he is talking about the voices in us that oppose God. Instead of pursuing a healthy relationship with God, the flesh seeks self satisfaction. For Adam and Eve that meant nibbling on forbidden fruit in order to

become wise – even though God, who provided them with Paradise, told them not to touch that particular fruit. The story reminds me of the struggle of children testing the rules of their parents in order to find out what the real limits are. We have a natural inclination to challenge rules.

The fundamental problem here is that children – our children or God’s children – do not see clearly: children lack the experience to understand the full range of the consequences of their choices. For a long while God tried to guide humanity with many rules, but wise as those rules are, people kept wanting clarification and religious leaders found loopholes. Then God tried a new strategy: to live a human life in the midst of real people. Near the end of that life, the divine man Jesus boiled those rules down into two: “Love God and love others” and added this commentary, “Serve one another and remember me.” Jesus led by example – all the way to the cross and the grave and beyond, even to resurrection life.

Lent offers us an opportunity to practice setting our minds on the Spirit. In this holy Season, we intentionally listen for the inner voice of God and mull over what we discern. We may study Scripture and wonder what God wants us to learn today from these millennia-old passages. We can reflect with other Christians about our traditions and stories and manner of living, as we are doing at Soup and Study on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 in our parish hall. We tend to look for God in daily life

a little more often and to serve God in practical ways, as our gifts allow, as we pay attention to others and help and encourage them. Most of us come to Church a bit more regularly, to focus on God, to praise God, to sing our faith stories and their lessons, and to build up one another. Never take for granted your power to build up others! In Lent we practice resting in God and letting God restore us.

The rhythm of life includes cheer and challenge. A loved one declines. A child struggles in school. A marriage wanes. Meaningful work is elusive. We cope with a debilitating illness as we await life-threatening surgery. Chaos swirls around us and the darkness of the unknown clouds our future. We thought we had everything under control, and now we realize our control is an illusion. It is at this juncture that our practice of setting our minds on the Spirit becomes our salvation.

Dame Julian of Norwich felt the suffering of all those who were touched by the effects of the deadly plague that took a toll in Europe during her lifetime. Instead of turning to despair, Julian turned to the One who brought order out of chaos in the beginning. She prayed, “Ah, good Lord, how could all things be well...?” Julian reports, “And so our good Lord answered all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly: I make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see

for yourself that every kind of thing will be well. ...And in these words God wishes us to be enclosed in rest and peace.”

Faith is the fruit of the Spirit that empowers us to trust that “all will be well and all will be well and all manner of thing will be well.” Such a faith blossomed in James Weldon Johnson’s poetic imagination, and he has left the world with this vision of divine grace at the moment when we move through the portal of death to the blissful life beyond:

Weep not, weep not,
 She is not dead;
 She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
 Heart-broken husband — weep no more;
 Grief-stricken son — weep no more;
 Left-lonesome daughter — weep no more;
 She only just gone home.

Day before yesterday morning,
 God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
 Looking down on all his children,
 And his eye fell of Sister Caroline,
 Tossing on her bed of pain.
 And God's big heart was touched with pity,
 With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on his throne,
 And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his right hand:
 Call me Death!

And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death! — Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hooves of his horses struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired —
She's weary —
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,

Past suns and moons and stars;
on Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
Coming like a falling star.
But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
But she didn't feel no chill.
And death began to ride again —
Up beyond the evening star,
Into the glittering light of glory,
On to the Great White Throne.
And there he laid Sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest.

Weep not — weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.

To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. By the grace of that same Holy Spirit we can focus on God and take hold of life and peace.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 174, verse 3