

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Readings: [Ezekiel 37:12-14](#) [Psalm: 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8](#)
[Romans 8:8-11](#) [John 11:1-45](#)

Readings may be found on the US Bishop's website:
<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/032623.cfm>



Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian Exile (586 – 539). The question for the exiles was, "Has God rejected us and canceled the covenant with us?" Through many images and pronouncements, Ezekiel called the people to stay committed to God and hold fast to the covenant.

Our passage today deals with the people's sense of loss. They no longer had their land, their king, or the temple. To them, the nation of Israel seemed dead. Ezekiel tries to awaken them to God's faithfulness and commitment to the covenant. "I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back to the land of Israel." A little later, the prophet declares, "I have promised, and I will do it, says the LORD." In continuity with all the messages of God to the people of Israel, God does not give up on God's people, and nothing is impossible for God. The exile will end, and God will restore the nation of Israel. This passage also had meaning for those who worked to reestablish the state of Israel in 1948.

The passages from John's Gospel during these weeks of Lent invite us to an ever-deeper faith. The three issues presented, thirst, blindness, and death, are obstacles in life. If we focus on how we will overcome them, our efforts will fall short. The Gospels call us to a deeper faith and trust that God will bring us through whatever obstacle we encounter to a new and greater life.

John continues to use literary tools to challenge us to think deeper. As was discussed last week, John is talking about an event in the life of Jesus and is making an application to the lives of first-century Christians. The use of double-meaning words is one tool. Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus is asleep, and they take it literally. Jesus is figuratively using sleep to speak of death. Secondly, John uses incongruity as when Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill, he stays where he is for two more days rather than returning to be with those he loved. Jesus was close to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The text notes that he loved them. Jesus is not near them when he learns that Lazarus is ill. Since he was close to them, it seems if he loved them, he would immediately set out for Bethany. Instead, he waits two days. When he arrives, both Martha and Mary state: "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This may have been what John's first-century audience was saying. The early Christians had been expelled from the synagogue and come under persecution by the Roman authorities. Some were martyred. Since they were expecting Jesus to return at any moment, their cry could also have been, "If you had been here, my (brother, sister, child) would not have died. The answer that Jesus gives is for everyone. "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." For Jesus, death is not the end.

For most of our society, death is the end, and nothing more is possible. It is the endpoint for that person. The past is all that there can be remembered after death. With Jesus, life is transformed but not ended. Just as ancient Israel thought the exile was the end, God had other plans, so God has a much bigger plan for us.

One of the powerful moments in the text is when Jesus calls Lazarus to come forth. Lazarus has been dead for four days; ordinarily, physical decay would have set in. ("Lord, by now, there will be a stench.") It invites us to look at our lives and society to recognize where life is dying and where we stink.

The Paschal Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection offers us a new perspective. God always has something more. Death is only a doorway into something new, whether in our daily losses or facing our last breath.

The Letter to the Romans passage strives to raise our awareness that this new life is ours through the Spirit of God dwelling in us. In baptism, people become new creations in Christ, and the Spirit of God dwells in them. Paul declares that it was the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. It is the same spirit who is within us and continually raises us from all experiences of death, little and big! One's whole person is brought to new life. The Spirit gives us new meaning and life in our entire self, body, mind, emotions, and spirit. This is a foretaste of the fullness that will be experienced in the general resurrection.

Reflection Questions:

When have you experienced or witnessed what seemed to be an end of a project, relationship, or lifestyle? What feelings arose for you?

Did God bring forth new life in a surprising or unexpected way?

Where is there nonlife in your life, community, and society?

Where are you saying, Lord, if you had been here ...?

From what is Jesus calling you to come forth? What help do you need to accept this new life?

Where is God offering you new life? How have you failed to respond?

How can you better prepare for baptism or to renew your baptismal commitment?

If the Spirit dwells within us, how are we challenged to live?

If the Spirit lives within others, how are we called to treat, care for, or serve them?

When the Spirit dwells in us, we become temples of the Spirit. How are we called to care for our bodies?

Catechetical Themes:

Death

In-dwelling of the Spirit

New Life

Self-sacrifice

Baptism

Prayer:

For the Church: that God will transform our fears into hope, selfishness into love, and deaths into new life

For all the Elect: that God will lead them from the death of sin to newness of life through baptism

For all who desire to receive the Eucharist: that Christ's gift of himself will help us to live the new life of the resurrection and give witness to Christ through our words and deeds

