

Sermon for 26 March 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Ezekiel 38:1-14; Psalm 130 (UMH 848); Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

"If only..."

All week, the plaintive side of life has walked with me.

50,000 people killed by earthquakes in Turkey.

Six road-repair workers killed in a terrible car crash on the Baltimore beltway.

And then, as if to stress the guilty human aspect of everything sad, the disgusting sabre-rattling of U.S. government authorities about the dangers of Chinese aggression and the absolute necessity of a huge defense budget increase, and their total unwillingness to discuss negotiations over the war in Ukraine.

The scripture selections are right in line. As the Bible commentary points out, between last week's ascendance of David as king of Israel, and today's promise of Israel's resurrection by Ezekiel centuries later, stands the Babylonian exile, which broke Israel's authority and continuity apart for a long, long time of sadness and suffering.

As Psalm 130 so powerfully puts it, God's reliability and love are real, but only alongside pain, uncertainty, and sinfulness on the part of humankind.

And, in the voice of the Apostle Paul, we are given the great distinction of life in the flesh, as he calls it, and life in the Spirit. Even as we exist as natural beings, "of nature" we know, that way of existing is on the way out, and our larger view is on the life within us that is beyond the flesh, with all the mystery of resurrection as its real quality....resurrection daily, and at the end of time as well.

So, when Jesus' close friend Lazarus falls ill, the Gospel lesson is more a sign story than a news report. The sisters' grief and Jesus' own weeping at the tomb, with the stone at its opening and the murmuring of the crowd, "Could he not...?" remind us that it was his own act of bringing Lazarus back from the grave that the authorities would use as cause enough for putting Jesus himself onto the hideous, guilt-ridden Roman cross.

Why do such things happen? More to the point, as followers of Jesus, we must ask, Why does God let such things happen?

I was reminded by a dear friend this week that I must beware of getting swamped by despair and fruitless worrying, not just over my own history and failures, but by my conviction that so much can be done by government, and social uplift, and education, and all those good causes we see in our enlightened time.

“If only...” is the big Lenten question that will bring us, next week, to Palm/Passion Sunday and on to Easter’s triumphant celebration. Life and death are bound up in each other, and the only truth we have is costly, carried on in all seasons, without reliable external markers, aimed at service beyond our own careers or even our own families. We have a dream, as one of our own heroes expressed it, even as his view of it was incomplete and even more costly than he knew himself.

The grace ... and the gift of assurance ... that we proclaim as servants of our risen Lord ... costs everything we have to give ... and that is as new every morning as the dawn itself. Dear Lord, help us to rejoice through our tears, hold fast to you in all circumstances, and rise with you into life that is eternal beyond anything we can yet imagine. You are God, and we are yours, now and, please grant it, forever. Amen.