

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, CYCLE A

*Open with a prayer: God of all creation, we gather together to share our lives in the context of your life-giving word. You came that we might have life in abundance. Help us to reject sin and evil so that we might come to fuller life in you. Open our graves to new life in your Son, Jesus. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Sharing of life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?*

*Facilitator reads focus statement: On the Fifth Sunday of Lent our series of three Johannine gospel readings reach their climactic conclusion in the story of Lazarus raised from the dead. In communities where the Elect have been celebrating the scrutiny rites in preparation for baptism, this final story about resurrection from the dead serves to remind them and us of the ultimate purpose of Christian initiation: eternal life with Jesus Christ, the Risen One. All three readings speak of the victory over sin and death that we experience from living our lives in union with Christ.*

*If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.*

### FIRST READING: Ezekiel 37:12-14

This reading is intended to be a prophetic word of hope for the Israelites living in physical exile from their homeland and in spiritual exile from God. They felt God had abandoned them. Our reading is the final verses of Ezekiel's famous "dry bones" vision that God gave to him while living with his people in Babylon. The scene is one of complete devastation and desolation. The ground is covered with the bones of countless soldiers killed in battle. After bringing Ezekiel to this horrible scene, God asks him a startling question: "*Son of Man, can these bones come to life?*" The verses are a prophetic and challenging call to the people to believe that God will deliver them from the death of exile. Read in the context of Christian faith, one could understand these verses as a reference to personal individual resurrection beyond bodily death. When this text is read today with Paul's words to the Romans ("the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies" [Romans 8:11]), we understand how comforting the fullness of Christian faith can be in the face of whatever darkness, defeat, or disaster may strike us.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 130

This is a cry to God from the depths of one's being, a cry in which the psalmist trusts in God as he awaits forgiveness and deliverance.

### SECOND READING: Romans 8:8-11

In this reading, Paul contrasts "life in the spirit" with "life in the flesh". Paul reminds us that we are to live 'in the spirit' and not 'in the flesh'. This does not mean that we are to deny our human nature as flesh and blood creatures. When Paul uses the word 'flesh' he is referring to that part of us that is not yet surrendered to God and transformed by grace, that part of us that continues to be self-centered and rebellious against God and his ways. When Paul uses the term 'spirit', he is referring to that part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways over our sinful cravings. But, we can only make such good choices because our spirit has been infused with the Holy Spirit at baptism. For Paul, the Spirit was the life force behind Jesus' resurrection and is the same Spirit that will raise our mortal bodies from death to life. Our incorporation into Christ at baptism makes it possible for us to share in his victory over death.

### GOSPEL: John 11: 1-45

In last week's Gospel, Jesus declared himself "*Light of the World*" and "proved" it by giving physical and spiritual sight to a blind man. This week, Jesus declares himself to be the "*Resurrection and the Life*" and "proves" it by raising a dead man from the sleep of death. The raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own "hour" of death and resurrection.

*The story of Lazarus addresses the ultimate test of faith: the challenge to believe in life, even in the face of death. The first Christians had a deep sense that they may be asked to pay the ultimate price for their faith in Jesus. The elect*

*preparing for baptism in our communities today – as well as those of us already baptized – may not face the same imminent threat of martyrdom, yet we, too, must declare ourselves regarding Jesus Christ. The pointed question of Jesus to Martha, “Do you believe this?” (that whoever believes in him will never die [John 11:26]) is in fact directed to each one of us. Baptism is our response, our great “yes” to the question of where lies our ultimate faith. Today’s readings – as all of our Lenten texts – prepare us to answer that question at Easter when we are invited to make or renew our baptismal promises in the midst of the assembled community. (Living the Word, ’05)*

The great paradox of the story is that as Jesus gives life to Lazarus, the authorities begin to plan his death (v.49-53). Jesus is condemned to death for being a life-giver. How strange and evil! Also, in this story, we notice again the struggle between light/darkness, belief/disbelief. On the one hand, as a result of the story, many come to believe in Jesus, but others recede into the darkness of disbelief.

Also, this particular story gives us a beautiful blending of both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. We witness the *human* side of Jesus in his reaction to the death of his friend. He “*weeps*” and is “*troubled in spirit*” and the bystanders observe, “*see how much he loved Lazarus.*” We see the *divinity* of Jesus at work when he raises Lazarus from the tomb. The heart and center of this story are verses 25-26, when Jesus declares: “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life. Whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.*”

When Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus, he is confronted by the reality of death and is “troubled in spirit.” It seems Jesus is angered by the power and hold that death has over humanity. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus shows that he is more powerful than death. Of course, the “life” Jesus offers is much more than biological life, it is “eternal life”-a life that begins here and now as soon as we unite ourselves to Jesus. In John 5:28-30, Jesus says: “*The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God...and shall live.*” The raising of Lazarus actualizes this promise.

## **FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. Have you ever felt that your life was in a grave? If so, what helped you to come forth from that grave?
3. According to John’s gospel, our three big enemies are the *world*, the *flesh* and the *devil*. The ‘flesh’ is that tendency in us to live life without reference to God and his ways. What causes us to sometimes live in the flesh and to ignore God and his ways?
4. At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus says “*unbind him and let him go free*”. What things can bind us/you so that you are not free to be fully alive?
5. When do you find it hard to believe in the new life Jesus offers us, the new life in the here and now and eternal life after death?

## **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can act on God’s word in today’s readings. Suggestions: If you or a friend, neighbor, co-worker are in a season of death (grief, depression failure), be aware of and use the resources that can help one another. Name the things that may be keeping you bound at this time, stopping you from being fully alive. Decide on a step you can take to set yourself free.

## **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Especially pray for the dying and for spiritual freedom, the freedom to say ‘yes’ to the Spirit no matter what it costs you. ©

## **IMPORTANT REMINDER**

Next week's gospel will be the Passion story. Decide now if you wish to have participants read it prior to the meeting or during your gathering.