

Trinity Church  
March 9, 2008

Lent 5  
RCL, Year A, Lent 5

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;  
O Lord, hear my voice;  
I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;  
in his work is my hope.*

All of today's readings are familiar to us. We usually experience these readings within a very particular context: we hear them read at funerals. Confronted with death, and with the grief we experience in the face of death, we are hungry for words of redemption, hope, life. We cling to Jesus' words, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones brings us hope when we hear God say, "You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

Today, however, we read these passages in another context altogether. Today we gather as disciples of Jesus, journeying with him through Lent. We have rejoiced at his birth, been with him at his baptism, been flattered to be called as his disciples. We marveled at his miracles and are stirred by his parables and his teachings. We proudly walk as a child of the light. We want to follow Jesus. In him there is no darkness at all; the day and the night are both alike. The lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus. Things couldn't be better, until we read the eleventh chapter of John.

Jesus received word in Galilee that Lazarus, his friend, is ill, and that Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, are calling for Jesus to come and heal him. After all, Jesus is a healer; he wants to heal us and make us whole. Come, Jesus, and heal your friend Lazarus.

But Jesus says to his disciples that Lazarus has died, and that Lazarus has died in order that God may be glorified. When he sets off to Judea, Jesus knows that he is going there to confront death and all the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy God's creatures. Jesus is afraid; he is anxious for himself and for his disciples. Thomas says, when they depart for Bethany, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he is confronted with a desperate situation. Martha and Mary are beside themselves with grief. Mary is inconsolable, going with the women to Lazarus' tomb to weep and lament. This has been going on for four days. Standing before the tomb of his friend, Jesus realizes how deep human sin is. How in need of God we are. We are in death's grip and death holds us fast. We are rotten inside and already stink of corruption, and oblivion. We are lost. Lazarus is lost, and in their grief, Mary and Martha are lost to life itself.

Jesus is overcome. He knows that God is calling him to go to Lazarus. Jesus must enter himself into death, into sin, into corruption, into oblivion. Love so deep, love so high, love surpassing human thought and fantasy. God's love drives Jesus to go to where Lazarus and Mary and Martha are. He weeps. His heart is broken in love for Lazarus, for Mary, for Martha. That love speaks, "I am the resurrection. And I am life." Lazarus, come out. Jesus embraces Lazarus with life beyond death, with love that cries out of the depths. Lord, hear my voice. Hear my voice and live.

When the religious leaders heard what happened when Jesus called Lazarus into life, they were determined to kill him. Love this compelling, compassion this deep, undermines all the powers of this world, and must be destroyed. Jesus' death was sealed. But in calling Lazarus out of death into life, Jesus knew that in order for God's glory to be fully revealed, God's love to be fully known, in order for all things to be made new in him, that he would have to go himself into death, even death on a cross. He would not only weep, but cry out from the depths of his own oblivion. He had to give up everything, even God his Father, in order for God to love him into newness of life. Love him and the whole creation into resurrection and life.

And so this passage calls to us as well. We, too, must die to sin and rise to newness of life. This dying to sin is no small matter. It means giving up everything. Letting go of everything, every weight of sin that clings so closely. It means crying out of the depths, "Lord, hear my voice. If you were to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, no one would stand." I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for him. Only death this final, this complete, can be matched by love so divine, so amazing, that it cries to us to come out of sin and death into life. "You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live."

It is ironic that the same passages that we look to for hope in the face of death, are the same passages that invite us to die with Christ in a death like his, in order that we may be partakers of a resurrection like his. Thomas speaks correctly. "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Let us die with him so that we may hope to live in him. Jesus said, "I am resurrection. I am life."