

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Lent 5

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Mortal, can these bones live? The prophet in a vision is carried into a valley full of dry bones. And in that vision, God will ask him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Notice that God refers to Ezekiel as mortal, for in a much broader sense, that's the unique quality the prophet shares with all the dry bones that populate the valley. Beyond that, the prophet symbolizes the hopeless voice of the exile population. Not only has Jerusalem been destroyed, but the temple which served as the anchor of Jewish life and faith has also been destroyed and Yahweh, the God who delivered them from the Egyptians and bore them on eagle's wings, holding and shaping the society together appears to have been defeated. Mortal, can these bones live? The prophet doesn't pretend to have an answer to the question, and his response defers the responsibility of renewal, mending, healing, restoration and life itself solely to God. In a sense, that has been the story of God all along, He mends and heals so that broken bones may rejoice in His mercy.

The psalmist cries out to the God who mends broken bones and pleads to be heard. In his plea, he asks, "If you, Lord were to note what is done amiss, O, Lord, who will survive?" Who can survive? The psalmist doesn't seem to consider the nature of his and other people's sins or what they do amiss, not that they are unimportant, but the question is, what are they in relation to the mercies of God? Fleming Rutledge argues that God's justice is not in competition with His mercy; both (justice and mercy) are manifestations of his redemptive purpose. And so as hopeless as the human condition may be, the psalmist is rather counting on the mercies that God freely offers as his only way to redemption.

The path of mercy and grace that the psalmist sees as his way to redemption becomes recognizable only when we look at ourselves in relation to God, and conclude like J.M. Coetzee. He says “There is always something unmotivated about conversion experiences: it is of their essence that the sinner should be so blinded by lust or greed or pride that the psychic logic leading to the turning point in his life becomes visible to him only in retrospect, when his eyes have been opened.”

When we trace the patterns of our lives and the path our lives have trod, we can only tell the story of a God so rich in mercy that we can trust in him to restore to life the broken bones in our lives, our broken relationships, the broken expectations and hope. Mortal, can these bones rise? Yes, they can because we are willing to take a retrospective look at our lives with the hope of building a future devoid of the same mistakes we made in the past.

I never felt as much resonance with the hymn *Amazing Grace* until two Saturdays ago when I toured a former Slave Castle in my native Ghana with Maria Johnson. This visit wasn't my first, but it surely sounded like my first because it is like the Christian story, we have to revisit the story every year to relearn the depth of God's compassion. On this visit I heard stories that would move anyone to tears. One story that shook me was when we were walked into a small cell. This cell was for captured slaves who were troublemakers. There were three doors leading to the cell but with no ventilation. If all three doors are closed, you can be sure that a condemned Slave had but a few hours to live. And once the Slave is dead, he is thrown into the sea. The cell was so hot that you and I cannot survive in it for ten (10) minutes.

The author of *Amazing Grace*-John Newton, who was himself a Slave Trader for many years, could only look retrospectively about his participation in that dehumanizing trade. And it was through this looking back that he could muster the courage to sing of the joy of being a sinner.

Remember, it is only those whose eyes are open to the light of Jesus Christ, those are the people who can celebrate the exposure of their deeds because their desire is to be free from the demands of the flesh and set their minds on the spirit which gives life.

See, the hymn is about the joy of the sinner. For the sinner's joy is not about his/her sin-however many they may be, the sinner's joy is not about the gravity of his/her sin, the sinner's joy is in knowing the embrace of the Good news of Jesus Christ, the awareness that he/she has been found and released from the burden of sin and that God's prevenient grace is made possible in his or her life in spite of himself or herself. As Samuel Terrien argues "Not the man who is lost, but the man who is saved can understand that he is a sinner." For the man who is saved knows what it means to look back and count their blessings with joy. This thought reminds me of a stanza in Repentance-a poem by George Herbert. He writes:

But thou wilt sin and grief destroy;  
That so the broken bones may joy,  
And tune together in a well-set song,  
Full of his praises,  
Who dead men raises;  
Fractures well cured make us more strong

See, the psalmist doesn't impute any merit to the mercy he seeks, and the prophet looks at the dry bones scattered all over the valley, and is not left hopeless because he is deeply aware of the fact that we do not belong to ourselves, but we belong to the God who heals and restores our broken images into the true image of the divine.

It is this kind of restoration that Mary and Martha sought for their brother Lazarus who had been taken ill. In a sense, Mary and Martha are like any one of us-hurting and grieving the loss of a brother.

Their belief in the Messiah friend not only served as the basis for reaching out to him to come heal their brother, but their belief opened their eyes to see a different kind of a Messiah friend who could offer life, even to the dead. Mary and Martha are like Ezekiel standing in the graveyard of hopelessness and death, but now have their hopes restored.

In a sense, Lazarus is like any one of us-sick, broken and lying dead in a tomb with no hope of life beyond the walls of that cold tomb. But the God who offered life to the dry bones in the valley, is also the same God who calls Lazarus out of the tomb and offers him a new life which is not futuristic, but now. "Unbind him and let him go." Jesus said. Loosen him from the grips of sin and death and let him go. Set him free, free to rejoice in the mercies of God.

What is it that is holding you in bondage? To what are you addicted to? The beauty of Lent is that it challenges us to look at our addictions-our weaknesses and failures that often burden our relationships with God and each other. It is about our longing for the freedom that makes possible the opportunity to gain a new understanding of ourselves and our world-because we are willing to take a retrospective look at ourselves. Lent is also about the freedom to be self-transcendent-the idea that human character is a property of God mediated to humans by the Holy Spirit and that character does not thrive in isolation from God because it submits to God's law.

Mortal, can these bones live? For me, the glory of God which was made visible in the valley of dry bones and in the graveyard outside Bethany was not only about dead men walking, it was about the glory of the God who gives new life, even to the dead. For that reason alone, no matter the depth of our individual or communal sins, my faith is safely anchored in the God who gives us a reason to sing of His mercy and invites us on a walk with him to Calvary and beyond. Amen.