

**How much are you willing to let die — and still trust God?** How much are you willing to let die, and still trust? I know we're just two weeks from Easter and we're really focused on death & resurrection of Jesus. That's good! We should be focused on the death & resurrection of Jesus as the center of our faith. But this week the Lectionary calls attention to our own death. The invitation seems to be that we're best prepared for the death & resurrection of Jesus after we trust Jesus with our own death on the journey of faith.

How much are we willing to let die — and still trust God? That's our question. Let's remember where we've come in our Lenten journey so far. The first Sunday of Lent plunged us into the age-old human **predicament** of playing God. The second Sunday of Lent unveiled God's **gift** of new life on the cross of Jesus -- we're simply invited to look & believe. The third Sunday of Lent, drew us into relationship with God by inviting us to see how God is **with us**, sustaining us on all our journeys between hope & despair. And then after three weeks of unpacking the human predicament & God's gift, last week, the fourth Sunday of Lent invited us to leave room for **doubt**. Because in the great story of redemption God can use even our doubt. God can fill any places of uncertainty with his own presence, if we're willing to hold the tension.

Over these past four weeks we've developed a kind of framework for our journey through Lent; a kind of map for the basic claims of Christian faith. Maps & frameworks are good, especially when we're navigating unfamiliar territory, but

maps can only take us so far & every framework has its limits. And today, two weeks before Easter, is where we reach the limit of any map for Christian faith. Because **Christian faith isn't primarily about having a good map or a good system for life. It's about receiving life on the other side of death.** So today on this fifth Sunday of Lent, one week before we join the festive pilgrims for Palm Sunday and begin the surprising journey with Jesus toward his own death & resurrection, the Lectionary stops us & reminds us that we're not just spectators on this journey with Jesus. It stops us & reminds us that our faith isn't just about observing or understanding Jesus. **It's about trusting Jesus with our death — both now and in the future.** Trusting Jesus with any of our great losses now (our hopes & dreams). Trusting Jesus with the ultimate death hanging over our lives. How much are we willing to let die, and still trust God's promise of life?

Here's how it works. Both the Old Testament & Gospel readings invite us into the middle of profound loss & death. Ezekiel invites us into the middle of profound community death (the loss of a nation). John's Gospel invites into the middle of a personal death (the loss of a loved one). **The question in each of the readings is how much they're willing to trust God in the midst of loss & death.**

The death we hear about in Ezekiel touched on some of his people's greatest hopes for identity, purpose & meaning. It was a crushing loss. Because the God of creation committed to a relationship with them; a relationship that promised to use them for a divine purpose in the world. They brought plenty of baggage into that

relationship with God. Their ancestors were a messy & troubled bunch — but that's what made their identity so special. They were chosen by God despite their weakness & failures. It only proved God's love.

Until they utterly lost everything in a national death of defeat & exile. **They lost everything that gave them identity, meaning & purpose** six centuries before Jesus when the latest & greatest empire of the day — Babylon — conquered their land, burned their temple, and scattered their people to the wind. They trusted God when the nations around them were defeated by Babylon. They trusted God when Babylon was banging on their own gates. They even trusted God when Babylon carted off some of their royalty & upper class (including Ezekiel) to a foreign empire. But when their walls fell, their capital burned, and their people scattered to the wind they were dead, with no hope or meaning — or so they thought.

That's the setting for today's reading, when God brings the prophet Ezekiel on a kind of spirit vision (37.1) and sets him down in the middle of a pile of dry bones. God says, "These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel," (Ez. 37:11–12). God uses Ezekiel to ask these scattered & defeated people how much they're willing to trust God's promise of life when all hope is lost and their dream for identity, purpose, and meaning is dead.

**Here's the question for us: where is your hope lost?** Where have you lost hope for identity, purpose and meaning? Where have lost dreams about a family, a nation or a community to give your life meaning; maybe even lost dreams about how that community could bring light to a broken world? Where is your hope lost?

It's a pretty big question in America today. Whatever part of the political spectrum you're on, last year's presidential election turned into a surprising mandate on identity, purpose & meaning. It was about lost hope (for some) & new hope (for others). Listen to a recurring theme from Trump voters after the election.

- *I **hope** that [his] experience as a businessman will enable our country to operate more effectively.*
- *I **hope** for a sincere shake-up and a breath of fresh air.*
- *I will have more **hope** that my government is trying to make our country strong.<sup>1</sup>*

Whether you happen to agree or disagree isn't the point. We all witnessed the surprising power of hope to recapture lost identity, purpose, or meaning; especially when a large block of voters represent a class of people whose mortality rates have increased from fewer opportunities, higher depression, and higher suicide rates in recent years.

The question for us — the question for God's people — isn't which candidate has the best shot at securing hope. The question for us is more basic. It's how much we're willing to trust the God who brings life in the midst of lost hope?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/why-did-people-vote-for-donald-trump-us-voters-explain>

Wherever your hope is lost, don't lash out or go running for protection with the first person who promises to keep you safe. On this fifth Sunday of Lent as we prepare for the passion & resurrection of our Lord, hear the words of the prophet Ezekiel. **Wherever you've lost hope, hear these words: *you shall live.***

*I will cause breath to enter you, and **you shall live** (Ez. 37.5).*

*I will put breath in you, and **you shall live** (Ez. 37.6).*

*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**, (Ez. 37:13–14).*

How much are you willing to let die — and still trust God that you will live?

Ezekiel invites us into the loss of any social or community hope. **The Gospel invites us into the loss of our most intimate relationships and our deepest betrayals.** The death of Lazarus was a betrayal. That's how it felt to Martha & Mary (not to mention poor Lazarus). They felt betrayed by Jesus, their friend. The irony is that we have plenty of stories of complete strangers coming to Jesus for healing. Stories about synagogue rulers & centurions, stories about a hemorrhaging woman, or a demon possessed man. There's even a story about Jesus raising a widow's son in the midst of his funeral. He heals them all.

There's only one story about Jesus being asked to heal someone he loves.

*The sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill," (Jn. 11:3).*

Did you know this story is one of the main reason some scholars think Lazarus —

this Lazarus — is the author of John's Gospel? Because this story is the dramatic hinge of John's Gospel. This story is the only place we hear the name of a "beloved disciple" — Lazarus — and it's only after this story that someone described as a "beloved disciple" begins having a prominent role in the rest of the story. The clincher for some people is a strange rumor at the end of John's Gospel; the rumor that a beloved disciple would never die (Jn. 21.23 — maybe because he'd already been raised from the dead...).

The point is that whoever wrote John's Gospel, **this much is clear: Jesus loved Mary, Martha, & Lazarus. And still, he let Lazarus die.** The one he loved. The one whose death moved him to tears (Jn. 11.35). The death of Lazarus was a betrayal of love. Or so they thought. That's why both sisters — both Martha & Mary — say the same thing when Jesus finally arrives (a few days late & more than a few dollars short). They both say: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!" (Jn. 11.21, 32).

And **Jesus responds by asking how much they're willing to let die and still trust God's gift of life?** Or, as we hear: *Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?"* (Jn. 11:25–26). On this fifth Sunday of Lent, **Where are your most intimate personal losses and your deepest personal betrayals?** Where have you been betrayed by people you loved or trusted? Where have they let you down, or

left you to die when you needed them most? Wherever that is for you, don't simply lash out, don't simply look for consolation in the first person who promises to watch your back. On this fifth Sunday of Lent as we prepare for the passion & resurrection of our Lord — hear the words of John's Gospel. **Hear, first, that Jesus wept.** Jesus weeps at our deep losses and intimate betrayals. He weeps. **And then, hear this.** He says, *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live”* (Jn. 11:25).

**How much are you willing to let die and still trust God?** Today we're invited into the middle of our greatest losses & deaths. How much are we willing to let die and still trust that we will live with God? Here's an invitation in these coming days as we journey with Jesus to Easter: **bring you death.** Bring your greatest pains & fears. Bring your intimate losses & your deepest betrayals. Bring your death and carry it with you through Palm Sunday, Holy Week & Easter. Bring your death on a journey to resurrection and new life.

If you're not sure how to do it; if you're not sure how to bring your death on this journey to resurrection, just use our Psalm as a model. Today's Psalm offers a beautiful model for carrying our death on a journey of faith. **The model is this: cry, wait, hope.** That's how we carry our death & deep loss.

We **cry** — Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD (Psa. 130:1).

We **wait** — I wait for the LORD, my soul waits (Psa. 130:5).

We **hope** — hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem,” (Psa. 130:7).

Cry, wait, hope. That’s our model as we journey to Easter. Join the journey, bring your death, and hear the words of Jesus, who says: *“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. Do you believe this?”* (John 11:25–26).

*Amen.*