

## “New Life in Jesus” by Tim Hall

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year A) – March 26, 2023

[RCL:] Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

*O God, our strength and our redeemer, unto whom all hearts are open and all desires known, we pray that you would give us ears to hear your call, eyes to see your beauty in the world, and hearts to know your love... through our time together here today, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

I wonder if Lazarus was surprised. I wonder if Lazarus had any sense of time as he lay in the tomb. I wonder if he knew that he had been dead only four days when Jesus revived him. Many questions come to our minds when we read the story of the Raising of Lazarus. **It seems an odd choice, this story of resurrection amidst the penitent season of Lent**, but then again aren't death and life always colliding in our walk with Christ?

These long readings from John's Gospel during Lent have a depth and a power to them that can, if we take them into our hearts, reach the very core of our lives. We began Lent with Jesus tempted by Satan in the wilderness, an encounter we often think to be supernatural. But actually, Jesus relies on something completely human to overcome the devil, something available to us all... **the Word of God.**

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night, a Pharisee feeling dead in his own faith, looking for more. They speak of being reborn from above, born of water and the Spirit. Jesus tells him, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish **but may have eternal life.**”

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus' exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well; a woman wracked by the pain of life, an outcast. Jesus tells her, “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water **gushing up to eternal life.**” This woman, Photini, after experiencing the fullness of Christ, became the first evangelist.

Last week it was the man born blind, healed by Jesus with spit and mud, giving his simple, yet powerful witness to the Pharisees. And now, today, the raising of Lazarus. His disciples urge Jesus to go there right away... they've already seen and experienced his ability to heal the sick. But he delays, saying first that Lazarus has fallen asleep and then acknowledging that he has died. When he finally arrives, Martha and Mary, filled with sorrow for the loss of their brother, tell Jesus he could have saved Lazarus, if he had but come sooner. Jesus feels their sadness, their loss, and weeps with them. And then calls Lazarus from the tomb!

In all these Lenten Gospel readings we find a common theme: Jesus understands us. He feels our suffering and pain. He has experienced it himself, in his full humanity, and will suffer for us even more before all is said and done. But the redeeming message he brings to us... to Nicodemus and Photini and the man born blind... to Mary and Martha and Lazarus is... **We have new life in Jesus.**

This weekend marks one year since my father died. Although a day hasn't passed when I haven't thought about him, this anniversary found me reflecting on him even more. In our garage, which I was straightening up after our grandchildren visited this week, I discovered, up on a high shelf, some bags and boxes full of treasured stuff and knick-knacks I brought home when I had gone to New Hampshire to help my sister, Phoebe, clean out Dad's apartment and make arrangements for his memorial service.

There wasn't anything particularly amazing there, just little things that reminded me of Dad. Two harmonicas on which he enjoyed playing old time tunes and favorite hymns. Lots of CD's with all kinds of music and more... New Orleans jazz, classical favorites, collections his grandkids had made for him, an oral history of the Great Alstead Flood; all treasured. There were books about World War II and favorite saved sermons. There were stacks of coins in coin wrappers, not yet full, but being processed; each roll added to with that daily pocket full of change. And assortments of stamps. Dad always enjoyed collecting. And not just things, but friends. He simply enjoyed people, young and old, and people enjoyed him. That's how he lived 100 happy years, even with all of life's sorrow and challenges.

I felt that I had unearthed more than just a few trinkets. What I had unearthed were **memories so powerful that I could almost imagine my father alive again.**

And so, I found the readings we have today to be particularly apropos. For they speak of the power of life over death. Not of our ability to avoid death. No. We all know that we will one day die. That our friends and loved ones will die.

Like Jesus, we weep when we see others' suffering. Like Israel, we can feel dried up, our hope lost, completely cut off when we lose someone we love, or when we feel so overcome by our burdens that death seems like the only release. But, as believers, we know that the life-giving spirit of the Lord will renew us. We have Jesus' promise that his father's house has many rooms and he is going there to prepare a place for us. He tells us and shows us... time and time again.

Yesterday was the Feast of the Annunciation, 9 months from Christmas. It's the day we remember the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary to tell her that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. To which

Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Talk about new life in Jesus! Mary's life would be totally changed.

Judy and I have been watching a mini-series called "The Chosen", which is a beautiful dramatization of the new testament, with many embellishments to the stories we all know. It's really well done, with wonderful costumes, sets, and scenery. But what I especially like is the true-to-life feeling of the episodes. The humanity of the characters. Their foibles and doubts... and enthusiasm for what they've been recruited.

I was moved by a recent episode that centered on Jesus' healing visit to Syria from Matthew 4:24. It did not focus so much on Jesus himself, as on the disciples he had recently called and the women, who together were traveling with Jesus and supporting him in his new ministry. As they sat around the campfire outside their tents, they discussed and tried to understand the miracles they were witnessing. Someone asked Mary about the miraculous birth. She recalled for them the event some 30 years ago... about being away from home, no place to stay, with Jesus born in the stable. When Joseph handed the baby to her, Jesus was cold and crying, hungry, and oh so human and vulnerable.

**This is what I love about our story. Jesus is one of us. And yet he is so much greater.** If we can follow his example, draw strength from his life giving water and spirit, take solace in his everlasting arms, and return to him over and over again when we are lost... then we, together, can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine.

As we prepare to accompany Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to dine with him at his last supper, to become servants as we wash each other's feet, to walk with him on the way of the cross, to suffering and death; let us remember that he is with us, now and forever, that he loves us and wants the best for us, and that everything points to that glorious Easter morning, in his life, and in ours.

~ Amen.