

St. Paul: On The Same page

03.30.14 for Lent 5a

Day One: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

The old TV show "Mission Impossible" always began with something that couldn't be done. It was always something like, trick an enemy agent into revealing some information. Break into a highly secure vault without being caught. Steal a file, or kidnap a person.

Those don't really seem like impossible things, do they? In fact, over the years our idea of what is possible has changed a lot. Now we can imagine sending people to the moon and even to Mars. We can easily talk with people on the other side of the world,

and even see them from a satellite in outer space.

But there are still things that seem impossible to us. Just like it seemed impossible to the Israelites that God could make them a nation again – it seems impossible to us that God could erase our past – that he could give us joy again when we have suffered a loss – that he could deliver us when we are trapped by our failures – or that he could change someone else in our world.

Sin, slavery, cancer, death, warfare, loneliness, and many more things seem inevitable to us. Not even God can, or will, change them. And yet, he can. And he does.

From where God sits it all looks different. He doesn't see just this tiny little piece of time you call your life. He sees all his wonderful purpose for you. Can you?

Can you step outside of your narrow way of seeing, and see what God sees? Start with this, telling your Lord, "O God, you know."

Prayer: *Father Almighty, you know what is possible. Help me to trust in you, and let me see the power of your grace. Amen.*

Day Two: Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

A classic movie theme is the underdog team, made up of misfits and rejects, gradually comes to see their worth. By working together they fight their way to the championship against all odds.

In the movies they usually win the big game. But even when they lose, they learn a valuable lesson about teamwork, about the value of their teammates, and especially that they are champions whether they win or lose because of their intrinsic value.

The main message of the story is that people have value apart from their success or failure – apart from

whether they are the “in” kids or the social outcasts.

Ironically, while we love these movies and keep going to them, we don’t believe the message. We continue to consider the actors who played those parts to be heroes because of their beauty or riches or fame. And we never quite believe that a loser can still be as valuable.

But God takes this message more seriously than we do. He insists that our value comes not from our personal success, nor from anything in us, but from his love for us. And we are victors, we are conquerors, we are immeasurably valuable because of the value he has placed on us.

Do you believe that you really are that important? God believed it enough to pay a tremendous price for you. And this is how you can tell who you are – by looking at what God gave for you.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, I see my sins so clearly, and I know that I am worthless. And yet, in your eyes I am priceless. Lord help me to see all things through your eyes, as they truly are. Amen.*

Day Three: John 11:1-45

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."
... Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."*

How is it possible for verse 4 and verse 14 to both be true? Jesus said, "this illness will not end in death." And just a few verses later he's telling his disciples, "Lazarus has died."

The problem here is not that Jesus is confused, or that things took a turn he didn't expect. The problem is that we are looking at superficial things and Jesus is talking about what really matters.

Yes, Lazarus died. And his death was probably accompanied by all the things that normally come with

death. He got steadily weaker. He fought to breathe or he was in pain. His sisters watched him failing and felt terrible that they could do nothing to make him feel better.

They prayed, but Jesus didn't come. And then came the night when Lazarus's breaths seemed to come further and further apart. Finally he took a last shuddering breath and his body became still... and cold.

Death is so terrible. And yet Jesus says, this will not lead to death! How can that be, unless Jesus does not consider the temporary condition of our body to be the really important thing. What matters is the end of the story, not the middle. And the end of the story is life!

What impossible thing are you facing today? What seems to you like a terrible loss? What if Jesus were to tell you that this is not yet the end of the story – there is still more to come?

That is the message of the gospel. There is much, much more to come!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to wait and see the end. I know that the ending is in your hands. Amen.*

Day Four: The Blind Man Revisited

Last week's gospel lesson told the story of a man who was born blind. Jesus said that his blindness was not a result of sin. It wasn't even really a tragedy, although it certainly seemed like a pretty bad thing. But Jesus said that this man's blindness was a means to reveal the glory and greatness of God.

This week's gospel lesson shares a common theme: that what we perceive may not be what is true or real.

It would seem to Mary and Martha, and to the disciples, that the death of Lazarus was a really awful thing. But Jesus said that the end of his sickness was not death at all, but the end of his sickness was the glory of God. In other words, the end or purpose of Lazarus' sickness would be happiness and rejoicing.

The problem is, evidently, our eyesight. We see things one way and God another.

On my last backpack trip in the mountains we took a different sort of trail. We

followed a trail that led down a river valley, and at the end of the day we set up our camp near the river, between cliffs that were a couple of hundred feet tall. In the morning, unlike our usual experience in the mountains, the day seemed gloomy. We knew the sun had risen, but our campsite was still in twilight.

The gospel of Jesus tells us this: the Son has risen even though you cannot see it from where you are sitting. Death is defeated, even though it may not seem like it to you today. The blindness, or whatever other burden you bear right now, is a temporary tragedy that will result in rejoicing and happiness that you cannot even imagine yet.

The day has already dawned, and the bright sunshine is on its way, even though your life is still shrouded in gloom.

We shouldered our packs and began the trek up the cliffside trail with a sense of hope, because we knew we were climbing toward the sun.

Prayer: *Dear Savior, let me see through your eyes today, and recognize your blessings even before they appear. Amen.*