

Forty Days
LEAVING THE ALTER
Lent Five Video

I was brought to the foot of the dry, dry valley—
A parched soul.

Looking up at me were the desolation of bodies
Poured out before me
I looked down to see myself in their fallen flesh
And I was asked to speak truth to power
Against death and disease
Against my anxieties and vexations
Pulling my body apart
To keep from dragging me into the grave
Again, I was asked to speak against all that brings me to decay
Wrapped in lifeless pursuits and projects
So I am built up from bones to flesh,
As the Son of Man
And flesh to breath
And from breath to life
God's life
The Spirit drenching my thirst

And in looking down,
I found myself looking back up
From the depths
The familiar dark places
Where I find myself
Over and over again
Drinking from the fountain of darkness
Hoping for the light of morning
To open my eyes to something more than darkness
Invisible Spirit,
Life waking in me
So to breathe
At times I attempt to take in the air
And at times it hurts to just hope

For my fallen dreams
Do not rise easily
Disappointment trembling in a pile of feathers
Trying to find a pulse

Lazarus knew death
The intimacy of separation
Of losing parts of one's self
Living in the land, alone to our devices
Watering the cracked clay
with tears mixed with longing
He heard a voice calling
To the tomb and the shroud
A voice pulled his heart
Waking him from his desolate dreams
A voice yet to know the depths of this pain
This experience still foreign to him
But the Master still calls,
And Lazarus still hears

Outside the grave
Jesus was weeping,
Not for Lazarus
But for our not being able to see
The place outside the grave
Unable to know the love that is present
The life that is before us,
In flesh and blood
Our eyes, unwrapped.

Questions for Reflection

1. What would it be like to be given life to our “dry bones”?
2. What are the things in your life that are pulling you apart or under “decay”?
3. What “fallen dreams” might you have that do not “rise easily”? In this poem, death is described as “The intimacy of separation/Of losing

parts of one's self"? What might this mean? How is death more than just the end of physical life?

4. How might Jesus call us from our "desolate dreams"? What might this voice sound like for you?
5. The last stanza is a retelling of the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. What might it mean to say, "Jesus was weeping,/Not for Lazarus/But for our not being able to see"?

How might our eyes still be "wrapped" in burial cloth and not see "the life that is before us"?

Practice of Lent

Death does not only come at the end of our lives, it eats away at us each day. Paul would write, "For the wages of sin is death..."¹ In a time of day-worker economics, Paul describes death as something that is paid out daily. It did not only come when our physical bodies died. We experience death each day when we move out of relationship with others and with God. However, the other part of that verse is "but the gift of God is life eternal, in Christ Jesus our Lord." If death is paid each day for sin, then life is given freely each day by God. The word "eternal life" is a unique word in Greek because joined with the word "life" the adjective "eternal" does not mean "everlasting" as in a quantity of life, but it describes a quality of life. Eternal life is not duration of life. In horror fiction, vampires have "eternal" life, but they are actually dead. Eternal life is about a kind of life that is lived in the present, not after someone dies.

The Bible describes the Spirit of God as life, wind, and breath. The Spirit breathes into the dead bones. It is what provides the animating principle to our lives. Life lived connected to the Spirit of God is a life that is always drawing on the Source of life. In Greek, the word for life (*zoe*) is distinguished by physical breath (*psuche*).² In other words, in our modern world, breathing

¹ Romans 6:23.

² *Psyche* also has the sense of "human soul"; however, the sense is of human animating principle. Despite some recent views of Greek philosophy, not all Greek thought sought to divide body from soul.

is an indicator of life. However, this is not what it means to live. Living is more than respiration. It is a connection to the Source of all living things, the Spirit of God.

To continue my horror movie theme, the idea of the zombie was actually a commentary on modern American life. A zombie is an animated, “undead” thing. It moves around, feet shuffling, hands flailing, constantly hungry, but it is not alive. Many of us live as “zombies,” with little purpose in life but to consume things. How might we live fully as the people in whom we were made to be? Perhaps a place to start is to realize places in our lives that reek of death and allow God’s Spirit to breathe life back to those places. However, this is a messy process in which some of us would rather not engage. Even for Lazarus, being raised from the dead also meant having his family and friends unbind him from his burial wrappings. We may need to also need the help of others, so we might enter back into “the land of the living.”

Phuc Luu