



LENT 5 A
10 April AD 2011
ekiel 37 & John 11

If you are just joining us, “A Change of Heart” has been our theme for this Lenten season. It has been a convenient lens with which to read and preach the GOSPEL OF JOHN; a theme suggested by a piece of music I heard the choir rehearse a few months back. It has really been something of an epiphany in the study of the New Testament for me; I will never look at John 3:16 without remembering this season and the insights I have gleaned from the

study and the preaching of JOHN.

(This morning I have to ask you to keep in mind that in Hebrew and in Greek (the languages in which the Bible comes down to us) –you will need to remember that the words wind, breath, breathe and Spirit are all related and interchangeable. In Hebrew the word is *ruach*; and in Greek *pneuma*.)

Ezekiel’s vision, the Valley of the Bones, is about the rebirth of hope in Israel, or the rebirth of hope *for* Israel. The nation is dead, dry as dust, lifeless as the bones of their countrymen left, hopeless. But our God is an awesome God. The Spirit of our God is a mighty Spirit, he is able to and will breathe new life, new spirit, new hope into a nation believed dead. Israel is in exile, captivity—it does not perceive that God has a future for them. God will raise it from the dead—he has a plan for his people.

Ezekiel’s call is to keep hope alive among the exiles. Now it’s not as if God has a change of heart; he’s not fickle and he does not regret sending them into exile. God who sees things from an eternal perspective has always had a plan for this people. He will revive them and restore them. From them comes a universal messiah, your Lord Jesus Christ. Today’s task is to understand how resurrection, hope, change and new life are part of God’s eternal plan—*according to the scriptures*. God’s way of dealing with sinners is consistent.

Easter morning’s good news should be no surprise to those who love God and have

sat at the feet of Jesus listening to him. We've known that the Son of Man was going to be betrayed, suffer and rise; he told us. Death and resurrection have been part of John's Gospel since we began our Lenten journey four weeks ago: John 3:15; again 12:31-33.

Death and resurrection are a part of our life story too. We have come to take it for granted, as much it appears, as Martha and Mary have. But that does not keep the sisters from expressing their disappointment. You can read a lot into their silences, in between the lines.

"Lord if you would have come sooner, if you had been here (for our brother, your friend) he would not have died." "Oh yes, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." And, "I know that you are the Christ..."

"Well, thank you for coming Jesus, please excuse me while I go and tell my sister that you're here."

I wonder what the world reads into the silence regarding our hope?

You might think Lazarus is the center of the story, he is not. John tells it so that Jesus is. Lazarus says not a word in scripture. Someone once told me that's because he's angry. Think of it, you are suddenly yanked out of glory and returned to life, back to living in the dust and poverty of first century Bethany. (Could be a plot for a movie!) Poor Lazarus must get old, get sick and die all over again.

The change of heart this morning is in the sisters isn't it? They need to see that the resurrection isn't just for the future, it's for now. Life, eternal life consists in Jesus Christ—in losing our lives in his. It's "the mystical union stuff" again, but garbed in a different language. By water and the Spirit our lives are united to Christ *now*, we lose ourselves in his death and resurrection *now*; his death is the one we deserved, his new life is ours too.

Regarding our silent hope; one day we will wake in glory, sharing Jesus' likeness, sharing his throne with the apostles, martyrs, and all the saints—we shall be one in Christ, one in God's love. But *"beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* 1 John 3:2

Mary and Martha, perhaps even Lazarus, all tacitly believed in Jesus, that he was the promised messiah. From Martha's own lips, she believed that he *"was the Son of God who is coming into the world."* (v. 27) But notice that she does not appear to comprehend what Jesus just said to her, about resurrection, dying and living. There is nothing personal in her words. And I don't think Mary gets it either.

Shortly, Jesus will show them all. This is why he delayed his coming in the first place. *“Didn’t I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”*

With a deep breath he calls out to his friend in the grave, and that breath—that holy wind was the breath of life. It carried with it the life-giving Word of God, a Word which has as its power the Holy Spirit of God. Death had no choice but to release its hold on the man’s body, and now they need to cut away the linen bindings.

The freeing of Lazarus means the death of Jesus. Yes, you need to read the rest of the chapter at home. In doing so you’ll see that this event, more than any other, precipitates the plot on Jesus’ life. This event moves many people to believe in Jesus: not just tacitly, silently, in a benign way. The people believe in him, we have to understand it in the fullest sense, they trust in Jesus. The establishment has a change of heart too. No longer do they ignore Jesus, they decide he must die.

Mary and Martha no longer *tacitly* believe. A week later, nearing Passover, the sisters with their brother throw a dinner party to honor Jesus. At dinner, Mary makes the presentation, a very public gift—she pours expensive oil all over her hero, *their* Lord, the Messiah—the one whom they now believe is Life itself. Their faith is no longer *tacit, silent, wordless*. This perfume raises a big stink in more ways than one. People will talk. We know where the sisters and Lazarus stand. (Check out 12:10) What about you?

A change of heart is what it’s been about. In every one of these accounts there has been yet one more participant. You. You have been part of this saga since 3:16 when we heard John say, *“whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* That’s an invitation for you to believe. If it was too subtle, John reaches out to you one more time in 20:31, *I wrote these things for you so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have [a change of heart] life in his name.”*

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