

Bishop Sid's sermon for delivery on June 5th, 2016

A note to the presenter of this sermon

First, thank you for coming forward to present the message today. For many of you, this may be your first time delivering a sermon. To you, a special thanks, for delivering the sermon with your heart pounding just a little faster than usual. For your information, this sermon is being preached across our synod of 115 congregations, covering Saskatchewan and a portion of western Manitoba. While your representatives physically gather in Convention in Saskatoon, spiritually, the whole synod as one team is gathering together around the Word. Thank you again for your important part in that gathering.

Peace,

Bishop Sid

Sisters and brothers,

It has been my privilege to meet many of you in your faith communities in the past two years. I am continually surprised by how each community is a life form of its own. Some are smaller, some larger. Some are more outgoing, some more reserved. However, it also looks like we do share some common challenges as well. Most of our communities in the rural areas are faced with the challenges brought by the radical changes in the shape of rural communities in the last few decades—it is a much different world than envisioned when our rural churches were planted across the synod. Faith communities in the urban areas also are faced with challenges of their own. We live in an increasingly secular world, one in which the church is something that is not supported simply by habit. I recall Bishop Ray Schultz saying some years ago that when our churches were full, people used to go to our churches often because it 'looked good' in their community or simply because it was a gathering of a certain ethnic group—sometimes it seemed they came mainly for that reason. He added that today, people increasingly come into our churches for none of those reasons—they come to follow Jesus. He said that what that means is that "our boats" have less people on them, but those on board mean to do something. Still, that change in the world has meant working out significant changes in the way we staff and build ministry, and in the way we see ourselves, both as communities of faith and as people of faith. It is indeed, across the synod, a challenging time to be church.

In the middle of this world in which we live today, I would do three things today. First, I invite you to center on the Gospel text for this Sunday. Second, I would take you to the top of a high hill to share a quite spectacular vision. Third, I would bring us back to this place where we are meeting, to listen for the word of God for this faith community and for the lives of all of us individually as we head out the doors to the world today.

Please join with me in prayer: O God, may these words of my mouth, and the meditations and imaginations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Redeemer. Amen.

The gospel today comes from the Gospel according to Luke. Our text today comes early in the Gospel narrative. Early in the Gospel, shortly after Jesus comes out of Nazareth in Galilee and is baptized by John the Baptist, he begins to gather his apprentices—this ministry was not going to be a ‘one man show’. The apprentices you remember were these: Pete the fisherman, Simon the revolutionary, Martha the worker, Mary the listener, Thomas the thinker, and all the rest. These apprentices listened and watched, as apprentices do. They understood some of what he had to say; they couldn’t understand some of it—as apprentices also do.

In our text, Jesus and his apprentices are walking in Galilee, and they come to Nain, a town not far from Jesus home town in Nazareth. As they approach, they see a funeral procession making its way out the city gates. As they approach, and as they ask questions, they find out that it is a young man on the stretcher, and his mother is in the processional not far behind. They find out more. She is a widow left with only her children to support her. And the young man is her only son. And he is dead. What on earth was to become of her?

Jesus heart went out to the mother. He said to her, “Don’t weep.” Then he came forward and touched the stretcher, “and the bearers stood still.” Why do you think they stood still? Were they holding their breath? Were they wondering what on earth was going to happen next? Then Jesus said these words, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” While the bearers stood stock still, the dead man sat up and began to speak. I wonder what he said. Perhaps he said, “Oh, these flowers smell so sweet.” Or, perhaps, “What a beautiful, beautiful sky.” Or perhaps he said, “Where is mom?” Whatever he said, here is what happened next. “Jesus gave him to his mother.” And life began again for the young man, and for his mother.

Now the apprentices of Jesus were watching this story take place—we still are. What was it all about? Did it simply mean that there would be a resurrection at the end of life? But you remember the other story like this, when Lazarus died, and Martha, Lazarus' sister, lamented to Jesus of her brother's death. Jesus said to Martha, "Do you believe in the resurrection?" She said, "Yes—on the last day." But it wasn't much of an answer for Martha, was it? She seems to be just repeating the phrase from the creed, what they told her in Sunday school. Yes, there will be, someday, a resurrection of the dead. But isn't Martha looking for something else than just the resurrection on the last day, this day of her brother's death?

On the other hand, did the event at the gates of Nain mean to the apprentices of Jesus that with Jesus around none of them would ever need to say goodbye to mother/father/son/daughter? It doesn't seem so. What are we apprentices of Jesus to learn as we stand stock still at the gates of Nain? For a moment, I would invite you to set the story aside—we'll come back to the story at the gates of Nain later.

Come with me to the top of a high hill. Listen to the word of the Lord for the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a prophet during the exile. He speaks to his own people who find themselves removed from their land. The temple, once beautiful, is in ruins. Their community, once strong and vital, has been dispersed to the ends of the Babylonian empire. Even more painful, the children of the exiles are attracted by the wealth and the values of the Babylonian Empire. And deep in the empire of wealth, their children seem to be quickly forgetting the call to be people of faith. The project of being the people of faith looks to be at a dead end.

Here is what happens at the top of the hill. The Lord says to Ezekiel, "Look around mortal man, what do you see?" Ezekiel replied, "I see bones. A valley of bones. Dry bones." "Mortal man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel, being no fool before God says, "You know, Lord, I don't." "Preach to the bones, mortal man. Preach to the bones." What was Ezekiel to do? He preached to the bones. He preached of a God who made human beings from the dust of the ground. Preached of a God who delivered the people of Israel from slavery when they had no way forward. Preached of a God who called Abraham to go forward when he had no idea where it was all going." And do you know what happened. Snap. The foot bone connected to the ankle bone. Snap. The ankle bone

connected to the shin bone. Snap. The shin bone connected to the knee bone. Snap. The knee bone connected to the thigh bone. Snap. All around the valley the bones clattered together. Then flesh came over the bones, then skin covered the flesh. But the bodies just lay there in the valley. There was no *Ruah* in them. *Ruah* is the Hebrew word for Breath. *Ruah* is also the Hebrew word for Wind. *Ruah* is also the Hebrew word for Spirit. There was no *Ruah* in them. “Preach to the *Ruah*, mortal man. Preach to the *Ruah* to come on these dead, so that they may come to life.” Ezekiel preached to the *Ruah*, preached to the wind, to the breath, to the spirit, and the *Ruah* blew through the valley. And as Ezekiel looked, the *Ruah* entered the prone bodies of the dead and they came to life. They stood on their feet, an immense throng. Called by the Word, given breath by the Spirit, the once dry bones **stood on their feet**. Like a young man in Nain. Yes. They stood on their feet.

Before we get back to our gospel text, let me highlight three things about this odd sounding Ezekiel text. First, it is about death—not something our culture likes to look at, although the death rate is still about 100 percent isn’t it? Death is the reality for each of us as individuals. It is the case for communities too; they do not live forever. Many of the churches Paul founded no longer stand, nor some of the cities in which they stood. Dry bones happen. Ancient cities or towns or farms can only be dug out of the ground by the archaeologists. Old barns once full of livestock are left to buckle and collapse. Houses that once were the homes of families now stand as a memorial of what once was. “It all ends at the cemetery.”

Second, the dry bones story says that the word of God continues to bring life in the midst of death. Ezekiel preached to the bones, to those who had about given up. The word brought the bones together. It often surprised me as a parish pastor when someone would come up after service and say, “Your sermon really spoke to me this morning” (often for a sermon I thought least likely to say anything!). Outside of the worship service, I think each of us has heard the word coming into our own lives. Often in a time when we have been in some dark valley of bones, feeling cut off, at an end. Then, as if out of nowhere, something speaks to us. Maybe it was the words of Jesus learned long ago at our mother’s knee. Or the melody of an old hymn drifted into our minds. The word of God brings life into the midst of death.

Thirdly, something even harder to explain happens in our valley of dry bones. In the midst of the dullness, the uninspired prone-ness, wondering if anything matters, something often happens. Something happens that stands you up, gets you moving, 'in-spires' and you start to live again. This is the Spirit of God moving, blowing through your valley. It happens to us as faith communities as well, doesn't it? When unaccountably, we experience something moving us as a people. A holy wind blows through the community and the church rises up. We find ourselves welcoming a Syrian family even though there is nothing in it for us, no increase in membership, no increase in giving—we simply find the spirit blowing through our valley. A holy wind blows through a community and parents, sometimes grandparents, show up to service with children, usually noisy children, in tow. And we never saw it coming. But there it is. The spirit blows through our valley of bones.

Back to our Gospel text. The apprentices of Jesus at the gates of Nain are learning this. That day, they began learning that Death, while it surely happens, does not have the last word, not at the end of life, not in the midst of this one. Into the somber reality of death, a breeze is blowing. Old, dead, dry bones take on flesh, move, live. And Jesus comes out to the gates of the city and quietly says, "Stand up little church." Stand up, Peter. Stand up, Martha." Stand up and live.

Today, we apprentices of Jesus are learning just that. We are learning to accept that death is part of our life. That things do come to an end. We say goodbye to ways we used to do things. Sometimes we say goodbye even to church communities that have served well, and now rest from their labours. But we are learning at the gates of Nain that death does not have the last word. No.

So, sisters and brothers, in the churches we live in, in the communities we live in, if someone says to you, "It is what it is; there is no hope." You say, "Stand up, Peter." If someone says, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks; people don't change!" You say, "Stand up Martha." If they say, "The church is done for." You say, "Stand up Thomas. Stand up."

We stand by the gates of Nain with Jesus and know this. Though death does touch us, Jesus brings new life to our faith communities and to ourselves. We are brought together by the word; God, in God's own good time, breathes life into us once again. Though things change, though we need to change with them. God is not nearly through with us.

Stand up people of God. Stand up.