

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Ezekiel 37: 12-14 Psalm 130 Romans 8: 8-11 John 11: 1-45
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

“Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones; now hear the Word of the Lord.” If we don’t remember Ezekiel’s vision, it immediately precedes today’s first reading, we will at least recall the words of the spiritual based on it. Today’s Ezekiel selection is at the tail end of that vision. God leads the prophet to the midst of a plain filled with dry bones. It is a vision that describes the awful condition of the people in Babylonian exile. They, like the bones, are without hope, displaced from home and their religious center, the Temple, which is in ruins. In fact, to a people who based their identity on community, land and Temple, now all shattered, they are no longer a people, just scattered exiles in a strange land with strange gods. Sound like anyplace where we live? Sound like any feeling we get as we survey our modern landscape and the sometimes foreign-feeling culture we inhabit? Sound like the condition of our souls, our spiritual interiors, after long years of religious practice that has lost its former vitality and passion?

As Ezekiel looked over the dry scattered bones in his vision, God asked him, “Son of man, can these bones come to life?” (37:3) The question must have caused him to shrug, maybe even throw his hands up in the air in a helpless gesture. His response, “Lord God, you alone know that” sounds like a human facing the impossible. What can anyone do when the corpse is not only dead but turned to bones? And a whole plain filled with them! “Lord God, you alone know.” So Ezekiel is told to utter a seeming impossible prophesy over the bones, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!” (Notice the excitement and expectation implied in the exclamation point.) Is there a chance that this is not the end, but that God can really do something unexpected? Well, it happens, sinew and flesh cover the bones and more....the spirit comes and breathes life into them. That’s what can put life into what has been marked as dead—receiving God’s Word. If the people could receive and trust in that Word, they would be brought back to life

In fact, as today’s reading describes, they would be able to do the impossible, come out of the graves they find themselves in and return to the land of Israel. They would once again be a “people”—God calls them “my people,” that is, a people

filled with God's life-giving Spirit doing God's life-giving deeds. What God did at creation will be done for these defeated ones. God says, "I will put my spirit in you that you may live...." You can see why this reading was chosen today; it speaks to the Lazarus story of a dead man in his grave who has the Word speak to him, "Lazarus, come out!" And he does! (Another good reason for an exclamation point!)

Where is God when people feel dead? When hope seem groundless? When human limits are pressed and exceeded? When a people are ready to throw in the towel—or already have? God, Ezekiel reminds us, is ready to speak and do for us what we cannot do on our own. Such is the Word of God. The bones and graves of our lives are not beyond the breath of God. The Spirit will go where we are afraid to go and raise up what has been in the dust defeated. If someone were to ask Ezekiel, "What time is it?" He would respond, "It is God's time, each moment is grace-filled. Look out from your grave and catch the Spirit heading your way."

In response to today's readings, we could name the tombs in which we find ourselves; the places of captivity; the pits we have dug for ourselves; the situations that seem beyond our energies and even desire to address; the local and national separations and indifferences that reveal people's ignorance or not caring. We could also name where we feel overwhelmed by what we must face. Perhaps we went into the tombs on our own initiative, step after step of decisions that didn't yield the happiness we had hoped.

We full-time and part-time ministers find ourselves, after so many years of dedicated work, wondering if we have made any difference. We, like the exiles in Babylon, are tempted to say, "What's the use? I am tired of trying to change things. It is just too hard." We try to change the way the world goes about its business of ignoring the least-noticed, and vulnerable. We spend a life time at it and then wonder if all the energies we have expended in "the cause of good" have made any difference at all—locally or in a larger social context.

Retreat looks appealing. Not the kind of retreat one goes on to pray, listen and get recharged; the other retreat an army makes after a defeat. The grave of resignation seems very appealing; it is a place out of the fray where one can lick one's wounds and stay under cover. Thankfully, Ezekiel says God notices us, reads the parched signs of death and comes to our rescue—unbidden, determined and in time to

revive us. Hear that desire in Jesus' voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

Paul would call this grave thinking by another name. He says that is just flesh behavior. It is we humans thinking and making decisions on our own initiative, with no regard for God. He reminds us today that God has seen us, in the "flesh," on our own, turned in on ourselves—grave people— and God has given us a completely new way of thinking and acting, based on a new life. Our life source now is Christ and his Spirit within us. It is Paul's way of saying what Ezekiel said—God will open our graves and "have you rise from them." Paul is also saying that if we live only for ourselves, according to the "flesh," then we have chosen the grave where there is no life. Jesus calls us out of our graves and sets us free to see life as bigger than we ever imagined-- the new life Jesus gives us includes more than ourselves and our immediate intimates. Hearing the Word and receiving Christ's Spirit provides us with a broad vision of life—life in its beauty and grandeur; life in small wonders; life in a community committed to life-giving words and deeds; life in earth's multitude of peoples and cultures; life in the environment and universe around us. When we emerge from the grave with God-life in us, we also notice life where it is most endangered and vulnerable—life in the frail and unprotected; endangered life in the uncared-for sick; struggling life in the poor; despairing life in the emotionally burdened and mentally sick; lonely life in the widowed, divorced and orphaned; neglected life in minorities and recent immigrants; unborn life and state condemned life; unconsolable life in the grieving; and unheard life in those treated unjustly.

People who have heard the Word and have breathed in a new Spirit, as we are doing at this liturgy, know what we must do--- "Come out!" We must set about doing what was done for us, speak life-giving and affirming "words"—by means of both speech and action. We must breathe life where people are gasping for inspiration and hope.

Let me add a long quote by Patricia Datchuck Sanchez (CELEBRATION, March 2002, page 121.) that may stir our imaginations for this preaching. Follow her lead and create your own, "Come outs...."

"Come out," says Jesus, from the tomb of self-sufficiency where in you do not admit of your need for God and for one another.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the tomb of preoccupation with yourself and open your eyes to the needs of others around.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from your tomb of excessive busyness; take time to think, to listen, to be quiet and to pray.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from your burial place beneath that mountain of self-imposed obligations; untie yourself from the unimportant, the fleeting and the material so as to be free to experience the essential, the eternal and the spiritual.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the grave dug deep by apathy and ignorance and be newly awakened and sensitive to the plight of the poor and the oppressed.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the grave of melancholy and despair and be glad in the blessings that are yours.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the burial place of hopelessness and skepticism and be renewed in the knowledge that you are mine and I am yours and together we are God’s

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the thick-walled tomb of needless worry, be free of the shackles of undue anxiety and entrust yourself once more to the provident care of a doting and devoted God.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from under that pile of unfounded fears that have become a virtual burial place, untie yourself from all unnecessary concerns and find new courage and freedom in me.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the sepulcher of sin; untie yourself from all unnecessary concerns and find new courage and freedom in me.

“Come out,” says Jesus, from the dark loneliness of death be forever untied from its bonds and come to share the freedom of everlasting life with God, with the Spirit, with Me.

AQUINAS SUMMER PREACHING INSTITUTE

This Preaching Institute, in St. Louis, is a two-week course for men and women who preach in various roles in the Catholic Church as well as in other faith communities. This year's courses will focus on the history of preaching and the spirituality of the preacher. Darleen Pryds, Ph.D., associate professor of Christian spirituality and Church history at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, will lead the history course; Greg Heille, O.P. will lead the course on spirituality. Log on at <http://www.ai.edu/preaching> for a complete description, or call (800) 977-3869 or email aquinas@slu.edu.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Linda L. Clader, VOICING THE VISION: IMAGINATION AND PROPHETIC PREACHING (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003) Paper, 168 pages, ISBN 0-8192-1932-0.

A excellent book reminding preachers that creativity and inspiration are available to all on a regular basis. The author discusses ways of being open to homiletic inspiration and provides examples of homilies to illustrate her method. A book for busy preachers that suggests a spirituality of preaching through prayerful and practical openness to God's Spirit.

QUOTABLE

Preaching is dangerous because, fundamentally, it is a shared activity, rather than something we alone control. The times that unsettle us most may be when we think we have made gentle questions or vague connections, and one or more members of our congregation respond by setting in motion a new program or a change in direction for the community. We have spoken generally about a condition that might call for repentance or healing, and wounded people and those who care about them pour out of the shadows. We hesitantly name an injustice, and suddenly an action committee form. We sense that the situation had been taken in hand by a force greater than ourselves, whether we choose to name it group dynamics of Holy Spirit, and we tremble at the thought of being swept away to some place we've never been before and hadn't planned to visit.

---Linda L. Clader, page 2.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

---Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal

encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Ted Prevatte #0330166 (On death row since 2/22/99)

Raymond Thibodeaus #0515143 (3/2/99)

Lyle May #3/18/99 (3/18/99)

—Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

READER FEEDBACK

I read with interest about the run off from farming.[Third Sunday of Lent] I do not have the stats, and I do not farm but live in a farm state. I find it hard to accept the facts as given about farm run off. Most farm chemicals do not stay on the land that long that they would be causing 90% of the river run off pollution. It is to expensive for farmers to put chemicals on their land that are just going to run off. Also, most farm chemicals have very rigid application rules and farmers are required to be licensed to apply many chemicals to their land or they have to hire it done by commercial operators. Commercial operators are also very regulated. But the amount of chemical that is sold for use by homeowners in cities is not regulated and they can apply as much as they want whenever they want. I suspect that a great deal of run off is caused by city folks who are applying chemical not to grow crops to feed people but to have a nice-looking lawn.

Bless you in Christ,

Deacon Patrick Cunningham, Little Flower Church, Minot ND

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.),ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to:
<http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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