

God is full of surprises. Do you ever read a piece of scripture that you have listened to or read many times and suddenly notice something as if it is brand new? I had that experience with our gospel this week. We all know the amazing story of Lazarus; we have all heard it many times. What a great miracle that sets before us today.

But when I read it this time, what struck me was the getting there; getting to Lazarus in the tomb. Jesus was not with that family when Lazarus was so ill. Jesus was not there when Lazarus died. Imagine how that must have looked to his followers. Mary, Martha and Lazarus were close friends of his; they were not just casual followers of Jesus; but with all his great ministry to this point, Jesus did not keep his friend from dying. They had sent a message to him yet he did not go there immediately.

For a long time I thought that Jesus must have had to go some distance to get to Bethany. I was so blinded by the big story I did not notice that Jesus was only two miles away. Two miles is not that far. I could do that shopping on a Saturday afternoon.

When he was ready to go on... he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

What huge faith is shown here...by Jesus and his disciples. Jesus is confident that this will be a time great things will happen to show everyone the power and glory of his Father; and the disciples are willing to go along even if they are stoned to death along with Jesus.

Another surprise in our scripture today is that valley full of dry bones. Now we have to remember that Ezekiel was a prophet. He had this vision and to fulfill his mission, he had to tell it to other people. He must have done it well. We still read it to this day. Every time I hear it I can hear a deep male voice singing about them dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

Again I thought of the getting there... Taking the first step and finding the courage to let God be the one in charge and do what he asked.

Could you do that? Could you go out into a group of people and tell a story like that? Don't forget... no one had ever heard it before. I think most of us would say: God you want me to say what??? Who is going to believe this story? It must have been a dream, I think I will go back to sleep.

Our epistle today says "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." This is similar to the statement Jesus made about: "Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."

We are nearing the end of Lent. One thing that is being repeated and repeated is Jesus being the light and He is the light in us. The reference to light is the same as a reference to the spirit. That spirit that leads us into things that surprise us and those around us. Are we among those who walk at night; those

who stumble because the light is not in us? Are we trying to get along without the guidance that God offers us. It is offered through scripture. It is offered through prayer and community. It is offered through the counsel of the Holy Spirit. Lent is meant to be a time to fine tune our relationship with all of that. I hope this season has helped strengthen your relationship with God. I hope that whatever discipline you chose it is helping you feel closer to God. I had chosen a discipline to do this Lenten season and did not do so well with it. Some years that works very well for me but not this year.

One of the things that **has** helped me this Lenten season has been the study we have been doing here at the church on Monday evenings. It is called Soul Keeping and that is what we are about after all. The series began with the story of a village that had a beautiful crystal clear stream flowing through it that added a great deal to everyone's life. There was a man whose job it was to keep the stream clear of debris and from being overgrown. The town decided to save money by letting the man go, that he was not an essential employee. It wasn't long before the stream became overgrown, dirty and smelly with very little water flow. They hired him back and things became good again. Our souls are like that. They need constant attention to be free of the debris that piles up in our lives. Debris like rushing through our days without seeing how God is working in and through us; the debris of a rushing flashing loud world around us without sorting out the important stuff. The debris that gathers in the place where we should be praying. It is what we all do. Just like that town, we lose the focus of what is important. And yet we do not want to stumble in the darkness. This puts me in mind of a hymn:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,

That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

- It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

We hear such miracles and wonders today it is not fair to dwell on the negative. But there is a lot of negative there. The bones were dead and dried out yet God brought them to life again. Lazarus had suffered a terrible illness and was lying in his tomb before God brought him back to life. In a couple of weeks we will hear of Jesus' suffering and death. Then of course we get to celebrate the magnificent time of Easter and Jesus rising from the dead.

So we hear the same stories again yet they are still surprising in some ways. So we move forward with our souls in mind this lent into Palm Sunday and Holy Week. And we remember our psalm today:

4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; *
in his word is my hope.

5 My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning, *
more than watchmen for the morning.