

# FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

## LECTIONARY #34

READING I Ezekiel 37:12-14

### A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Thus says the Lord GOD:

O my people, I will **open** your graves  
and have you **rise** from them,  
and bring you **back** to the land of **Israel**.

Then you shall **know** that I am the **LORD**,  
when I **open** your graves and have you **rise** from them,  
O my people!

I will **put** my spirit **in** you that you may **live**,  
and I will **settle** you upon your **land**;  
thus you shall **know** that I am the **LORD**.

I have **promised**, and I will **do** it, says the **LORD**.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 (7)

**R. With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.**

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;  
LORD, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to my voice in supplication.

If you, O LORD, mark iniquities,  
LORD, who can stand?  
But with you is forgiveness,  
that you may be revered.

I trust in the LORD;  
my soul trusts in his word.  
More than sentinels wait for the dawn,  
let Israel wait for the LORD.

For with the LORD is kindness  
and with him is plenteous redemption;  
and he will redeem Israel  
from all their iniquities.

Ezekiel = ee-ZEE-kee-uhl

A reading in which a small number of promises are repeated and varied a few times to impressive effect. Focus on the phrase "O my people," which includes all the feelings of care and connection that motivate this reading.

This line rephrases the opening lines. Slow down very slightly to signal the repetition.

Emphasize "promised" and "do" to conclude the exhortation.

For meditation and context:

#### TO KEEP IN MIND

On the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, these readings from Year A are connected with the celebration of the scrutinies—prayers for purification and strength—for the elect, those who will be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

#### READING I

As we move into the final days of Lent, the readings for this Fifth Sunday of Lent invite us to reflect on the movement from death to life.

Today's first reading is from the Book of Ezekiel, which contains the visions and oracles of the prophet Ezekiel as he ministered to the exiles of Judah during the Babylonian Exile. The Babylonian empire had already taken control of Judah in 605 BC, but Johoiakim, who was retained as its vassal king, made a mistake in considering Babylon's weakened state, after a failed invasion of Egypt, and refused to pay tribute

to King Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon's armies responded in 598/7 BC by sacking Jerusalem and exiling its leading citizens. Biblical scholars think that Ezekiel was taken to Babylon with this first round of exiles. Not long afterward, Johoiakim's brother, Zedekiah, was installed by Nebuchadnezzar to oversee Judah. He, too, attempted to rebel against the Babylonians, whose armies returned in 589 and by 586 BC had decimated much of Judah, destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and taken more of Judah's population into exile in Babylon.

Needless to say, this was a terrible time for the people of Judah, whether they were in exile in Babylon or left behind in devastated Judah and Jerusalem. Like prophets before him, Ezekiel sees Judah's political troubles as God's punishment for their unfaithfulness to God's covenant, but he also holds out the possibility that the people will repent and that God would restore them, because God's covenant is eternal and because God will never abandon his people. This is the backdrop to the vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-10) and the *interpretation* of the vision (Ezekiel

Paul's reading contrasts the flesh and the spirit. In Paul's letters, the spirit is superior to the flesh, which desires, fades, and dies, while the spirit lives. This can make it challenging to read him to an assembly, each member of whom is in the flesh, in a body.

The sense of life is decidedly in the spirit, but it can enter the mortal body, too. Emphasize the phrase "give life."

## READING II Romans 8:8–11

### A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Brothers and sisters:

**Those** who are in the **flesh** cannot please **God**.

But you are **not** in the flesh,

on the **contrary**, you are in the spirit,  
if only the **Spirit** of God dwells in you.

Whoever does not **have** the Spirit of **Christ** does not **belong** to him.

But if **Christ** is **in** you,

although the **body** is dead because of **sin**,  
the **spirit** is alive because of **righteousness**.

If the **Spirit** of the one who raised **Jesus** from the **dead** dwells  
**in** you,

the One who raised **Christ** from the dead  
will give **life** to your mortal bodies **also**,  
through his Spirit dwelling **in you**.

37:11–14), which is our first reading for today.

First, a word about the vision: Ezekiel tells us that he was led out by the spirit of the Lord into a broad valley filled with dry bones in every direction. When asked whether the bones could come back to life, Ezekiel answers, "LORD GOD, you alone know that" (Ezekiel 37:3). God responds by telling Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones, with these words: "Listen! I will make breath enter you so you may come to life" (Ezekiel 37:5). The Hebrew word for "breath" is *ruach*, also meaning "wind or spirit," but

remember that this is God's breath! Soon Ezekiel hears a loud clattering noise and the bones come together, muscles and tendons grow on them and skin covers them. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath (Hebrew, *ruach*) with these words: "From the four winds come, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life" (Ezekiel 37:9). Finally, Ezekiel is told that the dry bones now-come-to-life are the people of Israel.

This is where our first reading begins. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the people in these words: "I will open your graves.

. . . I will put my spirit [Hebrew, *ruach*] in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land." Thus, to the exiles in Babylon, who feel as good as dead, the prophet is saying that God has not abandoned them and that God will one day restore them to their land. And why will God do this? It is not because the people have earned forgiveness. No, it is so that the people will know that God is all-sovereign and that God's word can be trusted, because it is in the nature of God to care for God's people.

Lazarus = LAZ-uh-ruhs  
Bethany = BETH-uh-nee

A long and complex reading energized by the intense emotions of the figures in the story. The outcome of this story is well known. Its mysteries reside in the power over death that Jesus demonstrates, as well as his declarations about himself ("I am the resurrection and the life"). There are also the curious details that texture the imagination, such as the days Lazarus has been dead and the potential stench of his corpse. You can linger on these details in your proclamation.

These are the four main characters in the story.

Rabbi = RAB-i

Emphasize the relationships between walking and day, walking and night, the light, and stumbling.

## GOSPEL John 11:1-45

### A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

Now a man was **ill**, **Lazarus** from Bethany,  
the village of **Mary** and her sister **Martha**.  
**Mary** was the one who had **anointed** the Lord with perfumed **oil**  
and **dried** his feet with her **hair**;  
it was her brother **Lazarus** who was **ill**.  
So [the sisters sent word to Jesus saying,  
"**Master**, the one you love is **ill**."  
When Jesus **heard** this he said,  
"**This illness** is not to **end** in death,  
but is for the **glory** of God,  
that the **Son** of God may be glorified **through** it."  
Now Jesus loved **Martha** and her **sister** and **Lazarus**.  
So when he **heard** that he was **ill**,  
he remained for **two days** in the place where he **was**.  
Then **after** this he said to his disciples,  
"**Let us go back** to Judea."  
The disciples said to him,  
"**Rabbi**, the Jews were just trying to **stone** you,  
and you want to go **back** there?"  
Jesus answered,  
"**Are there not twelve hours** in a day?  
If one **walks** during the **day**, he does not **stumble**,  
because he **sees** the **light** of this **world**.  
But if one **walks** at **night**, he **stumbles**,  
because the **light** is not in him."  
He said this, and then told them,  
"**Our friend Lazarus** is **asleep**,  
but I am going to **awaken** him." >>

### READING II

Our second reading is taken from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The section from which today's second reading is excerpted begins with these words: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:1-2). With that introduction, Paul continues to talk about the life of the justified (i.e., the Christian believer) in today's reading. Although somewhat indirectly, Paul suggests that the goal of the Christian

believer should be to please God, because the believer has done nothing to justify themselves, that is, to put themselves in right relationship with God. Only God can restore humanity to the relationship that it had with God before the fall, and God does so through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a free gift to all who trust in God, because it is in the nature of God to be righteous. This reading can be somewhat confusing, because Paul uses the titles and phrases "Spirit of God," "Spirit of Christ," and "Christ" interchangeably, but what is important to notice is that Paul is

describing the Christian believer's participation in the divine life: we are in Christ and Christ is in us. We have been invited to share in the life of God!

Paul also talks about those who are in the flesh and those who are in the spirit. Sometimes people are tempted to interpret these phrases as referring to the body and the soul, but, in fact, Paul is talking about the way his readers lived before they became Jesus followers and how they live now in the Spirit of Christ. Like the Hebrew word *ruach*, the Greek word *pneuma* means "spirit, wind, or breath." Paul suggests that

Didymus = DID-uh-muhs = twin

This exchange, concluding with "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die," expresses the core of this reading. Read it with care, allowing for Jesus' striking expression that he is the resurrection and the life to arise directly, even irrefutably, from this exchange.

So the disciples said to him,  
 "Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved."  
 But Jesus was talking about his death,  
 while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep.  
 So then Jesus said to them clearly,  
 "Lazarus has died.  
 And I am glad for you that I was not there,  
 that you may believe.  
 Let us go to him."  
 So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples,  
 "Let us also go to die with him."

[When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus  
 had already been in the tomb for four days.]  
 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles away.  
 And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary  
 to comfort them about their brother.

[When Martha heard that Jesus was coming,  
 she went to meet him,  
 but Mary sat at home.  
 Martha said to Jesus,  
 "Lord, if you had been here,  
 my brother would not have died.  
 But even now I know that whatever you ask of God,  
 God will give you."  
 Jesus said to her,  
 "Your brother will rise."  
 Martha said to him,  
 "I know he will rise,  
 in the resurrection on the last day."  
 Jesus told her,  
 "I am the resurrection and the life;  
 whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,  
 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

there was a time when humanity was not capable of pleasing God, because its priorities were focused on turning upside down the relationship between creator and creature (see Romans 1:16–23). But that is no longer the case, Paul says, because now they are committed to living according to the Spirit. Yet, sin still has power over humanity; this is what Paul means when he says, "the body is dead because of sin." But the Spirit of God gives vitality to our dead bodies, as he did to Christ's dead body in the resurrection. What a tremendous mystery.

#### GOSPEL

Today's Gospel is the story of the resuscitation of Jesus' friend, Lazarus, which is strange and compelling in so many ways. We learn of this story only in John's Gospel, and, although there are two characters named Mary and Martha in Luke's Gospel (Luke 10:38–42), they are presented quite differently here, even if they are the same characters.

The story in full is very long, but, in its essence, it is a highly embellished miracle story, which would have at least three parts: the description of the problem, in

this case, the report that Jesus' friend Lazarus is ill; the miracle worker's healing word or deed, in this case, Jesus' words to his dead friend, "Lazarus, come out!"; and evidence that the miracle took place, in this case, the characters in the story who see Lazarus come out of the tomb, still wrapped in his burial bands. This is the seventh and last sign—the term that John's Gospel uses to refer to Jesus' miracles—which clearly points to Jesus' own impending death. Seven is a number symbolizing fullness or completion.

Do **you** believe this?"  
 She said to him, "Yes, Lord.  
 I have **come** to **believe** that you are the **Christ**, the Son of God,  
 the one who is **coming** into the world."}]

When she had **said** this,  
 she went and called her sister Mary **secretly**, saying,  
 "The **teacher** is here and is **asking** for you."

As soon as she **heard** this,  
 she rose **quickly** and **went** to him.

For Jesus had not yet come into the village,  
 but was **still** where Martha had **met** him.

So when the **Jews** who were **with her** in the house **comforting** her  
 saw Mary get up **quickly** and go **out**,  
 they **followed** her,  
 presuming that she was going to the **tomb** to **weep** there.

When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him,  
 she **fell** at his feet and **said** to him,  
 "Lord, if you had **been** here,  
 my **brother** would not have **died**."

When Jesus saw her **weeping** and the **Jews** who had come  
 with her **weeping**,

[he became **perturbed** and deeply **troubled**, and said,  
 "Where have you **laid** him?"

They said to him, "Sir, **come** and **see**."

And Jesus wept.

So the Jews said, "See how he **loved** him."

But some of them said,

"Could **not** the one who opened the **eyes** of the **blind** man  
 have done **something** so that this man would not have **died**?"

So **Jesus**, perturbed again, **came** to the tomb.

It was a **cave**, and a **stone** lay across it.

Jesus said, "Take away the stone." >>

Even emphasis on the words in this line.

Even emphasis here as well.

Mary repeats the same words as her sister  
 Martha. Repeat them yourself plainly.  
 perturbed = per-TERBD = agitated and upset

From here to the conclusion of the reading,  
 Jesus is in complete command. He has an  
 audience, to whom he relates his miracle.  
 Take note of the rhythm of the words,  
 "Take away the stone."

Within the framework of this miracle story, the author of John's Gospel includes several other literary units. The first is a two-part dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. This is followed by two very similar units, which we will call the Martha cycle and the Mary cycle. Finally, when the miracle story is complete and in the verses that follow today's reading, the author of this Gospel includes a section that describes the people's reaction to Jesus and the high priest Caiaphas' prophecy about him (John 11:45-52). It concludes with a resolve on the part of the Pharisees and chief priests

of Jerusalem to put Jesus to death (John 11:53).

These additional literary units are laden with emotion, confusion, and befuddlement, but they are essential to the rich fabric of this story. The two-part interaction that Jesus has with his disciples immediately after the problem is described is an example. Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus' illness "is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." What is he talking about? If you do a deep dive into John's Gospel, you will recognize that John uses "glorification" to refer to

Jesus' death and resurrection, his lifting up on the cross and his lifting up to God in glory. But then Jesus waits for two days to begin the trip to Bethany in Judea. Why?

The sections of this story that we are calling the Martha and Mary cycles are remarkably similar to one another. First, we learn that Jesus is coming or calling to the women. Next, the narrator tells us that mourners are present. Third, we hear that the sister goes to meet Jesus and says to him "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Even emphasis on this line with a slight additional emphasis on "believe."

**Martha**, the dead man's sister, said to him,  
 "Lord, by now there will be a **stench**;  
 he has been **dead** for **four days**."  
 Jesus said to her,  
 "Did I not tell you that if you **believe**  
 you will see the **glory** of God?"  
 So they **took away** the **stone**.  
 And Jesus raised his eyes and said,  
 "**Father**, I thank you for **hearing** me.  
 I know that you **always** hear me;  
 but because of the **crowd** here I have **said** this,  
 that they may **believe** that you **sent** me."  
 And when he had **said** this,  
 he cried out in a **loud voice**,  
 "**Lazarus**, come **out**!"  
 The dead man came **out**,  
 tied **hand** and **foot** with **burial** bands,  
 and his **face** was wrapped in a **cloth**.  
 So Jesus said to them,  
 "**Untie** him and let him go."  
 Now **many** of the Jews who had come to **Mary**  
 and seen what he had **done** began to **believe** in him.]

[Shorter: John 11:3–7, 17, 20–27, 33b–45 (see brackets)]

Both cycles contain some dialog. In the Martha cycle, Jesus consoles her by reminding her that her brother will rise, and Martha assumes that he is referring to the end-time resurrection of the dead. But Jesus tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life," and she responds with a beautiful and powerful profession of faith of who Jesus is. These three attributes—"the Christ, the Son of God, and the one who is coming into the world"—are central to the way the Johannine community understood Jesus and his mission.

In the Mary cycle, Jesus dialogs with others, while Mary weeps in grief and pain. Jesus, likewise, is filled with emotion. The author describes him as "perturbed" in his spirit (i.e., emotionally) and "deeply troubled" in his body (i.e., agitated). Finally, shedding tears, Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb and ordered that it be opened. Why did Jesus wait so long to come to Bethany? He could have avoided this tragedy by coming as soon as Martha and Mary called for him! Or is that the point of the story: to show that Jesus could raise the dead, even

as the act of resuscitating Lazarus will lead directly to his own death? C.C.