

March 9, 2008
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45
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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

In his poem "The Four Quartets" T.S. Elliot writes that "human kind cannot bear too much reality." There is a part of life that is filled with agonizing pain, despair and grief. We can relate to the psalmist's words: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." But what we really mean is: get me out of the depths!

The novel and movie *Atonement* center around a lie, a crime that changes lives forever. In old age, the main character, Briony, writes an autobiographical novel. In her desire to atone for her part in the tragedy she creates a happy ending that never was. The truth of the true ending is too pitiful. She says, "What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from an ending like that? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of bleakest realism?"

In order to protect our children from the depths we tell them, for a time, the "little white lie" that nothing will ever happen to them. That they will always be safe. But the truth is: life is scary and dangerous. And there is always risk. We may go through life humming but then something happens. A shooting. An illness. A broken heart. A loss. The pits... the depths.

When the Israelites were in exile, cut off from their home, they were in the depths of despair. It was like being in a valley of dry bones. Their hope was completely dried up. They could see no future. Their spirits were dead. And they wondered where God had gone. In such a graveyard of despair, in the depths of loss can these bones live?

There's another graveyard in today's gospel. Lazarus is dead. Mary and Martha are grieving. They are helpless and hopeless. In the depths of shock and despair there are more questions. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man kept this man from dying? Why does life have to be this way? Can't God take us out of the depths and save us from these unbearable losses?

The well-known preacher William Sloane Coffin faced a horrible loss late in life. While driving in a terrible storm his twenty-four year old son was killed in a car accident. The young Alexander was a day-brightener to his friends. To his family he was "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky."

The day after the accident a woman came over, carrying ... about eighteen quiches. She shook her head, and while heading for the kitchen said sadly, "I just don't understand the will of God." In hot pursuit Coffin blurted out, "I'll say you don't, lady!" In other words, God is not a cosmic sadist causing suffering and death.

Instead, God enters our grief, comes into the depths of our deep losses. In our gospel we see Jesus at his most human. He is deeply disturbed by a grief that is the absence of God. It is the agony of Jesus crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As Coffin writes: "The reality of grief is like the solitude of pain, the feeling that your heart is in pieces, your mind's a blank, that, to quote Lord Byron, there is not joy the world can give like that it takes away."

As Jesus enters the depths of human suffering he shares the grief of Mary and Martha. He tears reveal the heart of our humanity: the deeper we love, the deeper we grieve. Or as a distraught young widow once said: "Someone should have told me that all marriages end either in divorce or death." It is a truth we don't think much about when we give our heart away to anyone that we love. Or, as I read this week, love readies us for weeping. Our first kiss and our first tear are linked.

As much as we want to avoid funerals and deaths, they are the reality of life. I sometimes joke that in this young and healthy congregation I have about .9 funerals per year. But in the past month three members have lost a parent. While attending the funerals I have been struck by the power of love and hope even in the depths of great loss.

And certainly we know that loss is an inclusive concept. As one philosopher said: "A person's heart is a grave long before he or she is buried. Youth dies and beauty, and hope, and desire. And a grave is buried within a grave when a person is buried." (Eric Hoffer)

As we approach Good Friday and Easter we, in a sense, walk through the graveyard of loss in its many forms. Instead of denying suffering we seek to open our hearts to the great mystery of life. As God join us in the depths, shares our loss, our grief, our tears, we know that we are not alone. The good news is not that we are taken out of the depths, but that Christ joins us in all those god-forsaken places where we see no hope or no tomorrow.

At the tomb Jesus cries: "Lazarus, come out; unbind him and let him go." To this assembly gathered today God calls out our name and breathes new life on us. And promises the springtime hope of resurrection. Those who believe, who trust this mystery, will never die. And as much as we treasure that future hope, it is for this very day as well. Jesus says to us: I am the resurrection and the life. Feel the

breath in your lungs. Taste God's mercy in the broken bread and shared cup of this table. Draw strength from the community gathered here this Lord's Day. For this is eternal life.

It is the mystery to which we will return all through our lives. In our most vulnerable and most human moments, in our tears of helplessness and grief ... in the depths is already the seed of growth, of transformation, and of life beyond what we can imagine. As an Hasidic rabbi once wrote, "There is nothing so whole as a broken heart." The depths of life break our hearts wide open, and it is that openness that makes us truly whole.

It is in the depths that God dwells with us. And it is in the depths where hope is born.