

## (4-2-17) SERMON: BREATH OF HOPE

**PRAYER:** We thank you, God for another week of life and community. We are grateful for each of the connections that bring us together in your name as Oro Valley United Church Of Christ. Our body of Christ relies on the faith and service of each member and friend of our congregation. We exist because of all they have done and are doing. As we look around and take in the beauty of our setting for worship we are thankful for the work that was done yesterday to maintain our grounds. And we are reminded of the vision and the work that created this setting. Our prayers this morning are with Bob and Monique Henderson who established our prayer garden, and are in need of our prayers as Bob recovers from surgery. Be with them as they nurture one another and sustain their ongoing connection with us. We thank you, God for the goodness and generosity of spirit of those who remain steadfast in their support for our church, especially Virginia Harting, her grandson who is aiming to become a medical doctor, and Tom Weir; nephew of Pat Linder. Be with everyone who is doing their part to keep your word alive as we maintain our setting and are present for others.

**JOHN** (11: 1-45) We miss the point, the very essence of this passage about the death of Lazarus if we try to understand the miracle aspect, and do not put our attention on what it reveals about Jesus and the people who loved him. As much as Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, he did not make a bee line to be with them when he heard that his friend was sick.

This is Jesus being human; the first of several indications in these 45 verses that put us in touch with the vulnerability of Jesus, and Jesus in touch with our humanity. The same goes for the disciples of Jesus who were with him; especially Thomas who understood exactly what was at stake.

The disciples knew that those who wanted Jesus dead had tried to kill him and that Jesus was making ready to go back where they would have another chance to take him on, to take him down and to end his life. Thomas knew Jesus well enough to realize it was futile to try and convince Jesus otherwise, so Thomas says: "Let us all go, that we may die with him."

There is more than an expression of loyalty going on here. Thomas and the others had come to see in Jesus that there is more to life than safety, comfort and longevity. They had grown into the faith in ways that answered for themselves the question that Jesus asked of Martha: "Do you believe...?"

There is a lot going on here. Mary was upset with Jesus because he had not come back in time to save her brother, yet she relied on Jesus to be there for her and for Lazarus in ways that no one else could be. In his relationship with Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the disciples and in the presence of those who wanted to kill Jesus, he reveals himself to be more than a distant functionary of God. We see Jesus expressing his depth of feeling; every

bit as much as the people who loved him.

The shortest verse in the bible 'Jesus wept' tells us everything we need to know about the humanity of Jesus, of his compassion, his empathy and the depth of his character. We are not alone in bearing witness to the courage, integrity and healing grace personified in Jesus. 'Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.'

**EZEKIEL** (37: 1-14) The old testament passage from Ezekiel about 'The Valley of Dry Bones' goes hand in hand with the new testament gospel lesson from John. Jesus brings new life to those who believe that he is the word of God in the flesh. Jesus is the word of God come to life. Everyone who has joined our congregation, early and late in life, revitalizes our body of Christ because they are rejuvenated. Spiritual renewal infuses dry bones with the essence of faith.

Ezekiel was a prophet whose name means 'God is strong.' 'Ezekiel proclaimed a new message of hope and restoration.' Ezekiel believed that the Spirit of the Lord had brought him to the middle of a valley that was full of bones that were very dry. We can relate to that. Here we are living our lives and worshipping God this morning in the middle of our desert valley; Oro Valley. We have chosen to be here. Most of us have come and joined our congregation after decades of being elsewhere.

Our congregation is comprised of younger and older

persons who have in common the spirit of God; that has brought new life to us and to this church that came perilously close to being part of the desert landscape with no life in it. Instead, those who stayed and those who have joined, and those who continue to join and participate in the life of our congregation, are answering the question 'Can these bones live?'

We have heard and heeded the word of God who says 'I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.' The Lord said such words to Israel when it had become a nation of laws and rituals. When the bones of their faith were dried up and their hope was gone. Just as Jesus invited his friend Lazarus to come out of the cave and into the light, the people of Israel were promised 'I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.'

A colleague asks 'Where do we put our hope? What preoccupies us, fascinates us, motivates us, worries us, consumes us? He calls our attention to what Paul witnessed and that we are reminded of every day; the tyranny of narcissistic rulers, the corruption of their sycophants...the emptiness of financial and physical excess.' There are plenty of examples near and far.

In the present time as before, 'Jesus weeps; he groans; he grieves and suffers alongside us.' We are no different than every generation that 'must wrestle with what ultimately matters—with what is trustworthy, what is the endpoint of life, and what we allow to consume, motivate and capture us.'

The temptations are great, the distractions are plentiful; yet here we are once again, gathered to worship in the name of God. Amen and peace be with you.

**BENEDICTION:** As the practice of your faith brings life to you, you have brought life to Oro Valley United Church Of Christ. Amen. Peace be with you and go into the world in peace.