

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
April 10, 2011 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Restoration and New Life!

Psalm 130	Forgiveness with God!	969
Ezekiel 37:1-14	Dry Bones come to life!	1345
John 11:1-45	Jesus restores Lazarus!	1668
Romans 8:6-11	The Spirit lives in us!	1756

Informally before the sermon: What is going on? Bones coming to life and dancing around; a dead man coming out of the tomb after being buried four days ago. Are these miracles of God?

Are these new beginnings? Is this all new life, new breath, new starts. How can we relate to this?

One way is to look around outside at the new beginnings. Spring. Tulips rising from bulbs that looked dead when they were buried in October last year. Bright green leaves sprouting on branches of trees that looked dead just a few weeks ago.

These stories as well as what is happening in nature raises questions. Could these all be miracles of God as well? If not, how is this possible? What does it all mean? What should we do about it? What can we do about it? What is God doing about it? How can we understand it?

Well, one thing we can do is pray, and let's do that right now:

**Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer!
Amen**

God is at work in our world. You can feel it and you can see it. I love spring. I love the tulips and jonquils; the hyacinths and pansies. The budding of the trees and the greening of the grass. When I look around at nature, when I hear the birds in the morning and see the squirrels scampering up and down the trees, I am truly convinced that God is at work in our world. I see God as a creator and a caretaker, a loving parent and a refuge, and my picture of God grows more detailed and complete as I learn more about God.

Our God is amazing and what we read in the scriptures gives us a wonderful picture of God that is revealed in story after story. I know I do, and I suspect you do as

well, get more amazed every time the stories about God and how God acts in our world are told. Whether we are hearing the story for the first time or for the hundredth time, our picture of God changes and gets enriched as we see God perform miracles and as we think about the glory of God.

In addition to hearing and reading about God's glory, we see it through the spring flowers and budding trees; we see it through the miracles performed every day in hospitals by doctors and nurses. We see it in the eyes of a new born infant. Friday night Pat and I saw it as we celebrated our great-granddaughter Molly's first birthday. We see the power and glory of God through the eyes of the scripture writers who captured and passed on the wonderful and sometimes not-so-wonderful acts of God. Unlike the idols that some people worship as gods, our God is alive and complex; demanding, caring, forgiving, and loving all at the same time.

Of course it all started out at Creation where we first see God take nothing and make the world we live in. Our first image of God is as a creator. Like an architect designing a subdivision and the civil engineer laying out the streets and power grid, and the construction company with the dozers and graders, God designs, plans and creates the world.

Next we see God interacting with the people that he created. He walks and talks with Adam and Eve. He is like a loving friend at first, then when they disobey, he becomes more like a loving father dealing out punishment to a couple of teen agers.

Next we find God getting so upset and mad at those he has created, that he destroys all but a few people. Our picture is a bit confused by this action. Is our God really a loving God or is our God a punishing God? First God creates, then befriends, then destroys. But God doesn't destroy everything. He finds a faithful family and protects them.

These people get the opportunity to start over. The family of Noah is given the opportunity to repopulate the earth with both humans and animals.

It seems that God is always giving humanity the opportunity to start over, and that's a good thing! Don't we all need that opportunity to refresh ourselves.

The two stories we heard this morning about Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones coming to life and the one about Jesus calling his good friend Lazarus out of the grave are perfect examples of God at work. Both are stories about God giving people the

opportunity for new life; both are stories that give us a glimpse of the power and glory of God. Stories that add so much the picture of God that develops throughout the Bible.

Although both of these stories have puzzling aspects to them, the message they convey to us is not puzzling. God cares, and both stories are about God's ability and desire to continually restore us and renew us. Of course one puzzling aspect could be why God would want to continually restore us and renew us.

In the first one, we are told that the bones represent the dead faith of the Chosen People and their new life represents what God is planning to do for them. The Israelites have given up hope; things are not going as well as they would like them to and they have strayed from the path God wants them on. Their faith has dried up like the bones Ezekiel sees in the valley. They think God has given up on them; they don't remember Moses and Egypt; they forget the manna and quails and water in the wilderness. What have you done for us today, God? That's their question.

God's has a plan to breathe new life into them and revive and renew the people and their faith. God wants Ezekiel to take the message to the people that there is hope! They have to make some changes, but there is the opportunity for renewing and restoring their faith, and their lives. That is the same message from the scriptures that is aimed at our world in the twenty-first century. Remember what God has done in the past. God does not give up on us. Trust in God; don't ever give up hope.

In the case of Lazarus, Jesus receives a message from his friends Mary and Martha that their brother is sick. They hope that Jesus will come and make him well; they know he can. In fact, they expect him to drop everything and rush to Lazarus' aid. They know about the miraculous healings of the nobleman's son and the restoration of sight to the blind man; they know he can save Lazarus' life. And, Jesus knows it too. He knows that he can leave immediately and reach Lazarus in time to heal him. He knows he has the power, but he does the unexpected. Instead of heading for Bethany immediately, he stays a few more days in the place he is. Then he takes his disciples and starts off to the home of Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. He even tells his disciples that Lazarus has died. He puts it this way: "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Lazarus is dead, and now he is going. He leaves the disciples, and us, in the dark. Is he going to there to comfort Mary and Martha? Will he conduct a funeral or memorial service for his good friend? Why didn't he go while he was still alive?

Why? Because he wanted to demonstrate the glory of God. he wanted to let the people see the glory of God in action; to see and feel the power of God's love. He also said it was so we would believe. That we would believe that he is the Son of God and receive the promise of new life and eternal life through our belief.

Although Jesus had healed many people up to that point in his ministry, his message about change and God's kingdom was no being received by all. In spite of the healings and other miracles, people, including his disciples, seemed to have trouble recognizing who he really was. He was determined once and for all to prove that he was sent by God and that God can do anything, even raise the dead.

Martha confronts him first. Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. She knew he had the power. And, in this conversation between Jesus and Martha, we hear one of the most familiar and comforting truths about Jesus when Jesus says to Martha: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.**

Then he asks her, and us: **Do you believe this?**

She calls her sister Mary, and Mary says the same thing. Jesus, if you had been here my bother would not have died. And as she burst out in tears along with several of her Jewish friends who were with her, Jesus was so moved that he wept as well.

Then he reaches the tomb, calls Lazarus out, and restores him to life. No small feat! A clear display of God's glory. Jesus does not take the credit, he gives it all to God. And, it has the desired result, John tells us that many of the Jews who were with Mary became believers.

But it still wasn't enough. Not many weeks later, Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted and executed. Then, like Lazarus, he arose from the tomb and God's glory was demonstrated to all.

And, it still wasn't enough. Many people still didn't, and still don't embrace Jesus as the Son of God. For many people, his statement that **"he is the resurrection and the life, and that those who believe in him will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in him will never die"** had and still has little or no impact.

Except for us Christians who do embrace the glory of God and accept Jesus as the Son of God.

We continue to be amazed by the stories of Jesus. We continue to be refreshed and renewed by the God who brought the bones to life in Ezekiel's vision.

The most amazing thing is that all of this costs us nothing. All of this is freely given to us by our gracious God who loves us and cares for us. Who heals us and forgives us. Who sent his Son into the world to save us from sin and offer us the promise of eternal life in God's kingdom for ever.

I'm sure that my picture of God will never be complete but I am glad that I have the opportunity to add to it day after day by reading the scriptures and observing God's glory in the nature around us. I'm glad that God gives me the opportunity for renewal and restoration and new life. I'm glad that God gives each and every one of you that same opportunity.

AMEN