

Lent 5 – Year A

April 10, 2011. Sarah Donnelly, BA, M.Div. Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria BC

This morning we have had the opportunity to hear two very dramatic readings – a vision of dry bones that are gathered together, enlashed, and then given life through the breath of God, and this wonderful story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. They are dramatic stories, stories that come from a very different age and culture than our own, and because of this we can struggle to see them as *our* stories living here in North America, 2000 years later. But in sub-Saharan Africa today, a phenomenon known as the Lazarus Effect takes place in small villages and large cities on a daily basis.

The Lazarus Effect refers to those who are gravely ill due to HIV/AIDS, possibly just days from death, and who are brought back to life thanks to the provision of life saving medication – medication that costs just .40 cents a day.

For most of us, the concept of being called back from the dead is beyond our imagination. In a country like Canada where life expectancy is close to 80 years, death can sometimes seem a distant reality to many of us. But death is a close companion to many of our brothers and sisters, and in developing countries such as Zambia, the life expectancy has dropped to 37 years of age. 37 – we can hardly wrap our minds around what this must be like for family after family after family. And so we must listen to the stories of those who know this life well, in order to know how we should respond. This is the story of Princess Kasune Zulu, a native of Zambia and an HIV and AIDS advocate and educator.

She writes: “I was born to a relatively wealthy Zambian family in 1976. The early years of my childhood were joyful and privileged by Zambian standards. Life for me has faced a number of crossroads, the first of which came at age ten when my parents succumbed to what was then an undiagnosed, mystery illness. My family was forced to move to a traditional rural village where I found myself having to walk for many miles to fetch dirty drinking water before school each morning.

At the time, there was no treatment available for the mystery illness and all I could do was watch my parents waste away. I was so desperate to save them that I even recall trying to carry my own dad on my back to a hospital, his long legs dangling in the dirt.

My parents both lost their fight within months of each other. By 18 I was alone, the head of my household, left in charge of 8 dependents. No child should be forced to nurse their parents to their death, but in my country I am far from unique – one in three children has had to watch their parents die as a result of AIDS.

With few choices for survival but to marry someone older who could provide for my family, it was not long before I was a mother of two and I was HIV positive myself.

My story could have a number of endings. The most likely, provided in my doctor’s diagnosis, was that I would have died within six months, leaving behind two children under the age of 5.

Between the time of my parents’ death and my own diagnosis a new treatment had become available, but not in countries like Zambia. Its’ \$10,000 annual price tag was simply not even a consideration for our desperate population.

But God had another ending written for me. My journey has taken me across the world, to the USA where a kind Bishop agreed to fund anti-retroviral treatment for me, the very treatment that could have saved my parents life, which was, at the time costing \$10,000 per year. In 2002, this made me one of very few Zambians given access to this life-saving treatment.

God has used me - an ordinary, village girl, in extraordinary ways. My calling has taken me all the way to the Oval Office where I helped urge then - President George W Bush to commit \$15 billion to the fight against AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean.

In the developed world, HIV is considered almost as manageable as diabetes – continual medication and healthy lifestyles see sufferers live long, healthy lives. Today almost four million Africans have been given access to life saving medication known as Anti-Retroviral Treatment.

This treatment is bringing back people back from their deathbeds. They are bringing people who should or could have died, back to life. For as little as \$0.40 a day and within 40 days we see amazing results. This is the Lazarus Effect! – it is saving parents, teachers, nurses, and doctors, among others, on a daily basis.

In John 11, we see Jesus come alongside those who mourn. He shows compassion. He brings Lazarus back from the dead.

Today it is our turn. We can make the Lazarus Effect a symbol of our time, the great moral legacy of our generation. We need to use our voice as individuals and as a collective. We the church are an army of 2 billion volunteers. We are the hands and feet Jesus is counting on.”

What a powerful witness! I appreciate this reflection, written by a young, strong woman, as she recounts her own life experiences. I think it is so important that we keep in mind that the stories we hear in our sacred scriptures are not only the stories of our ancestors, but they are *our* stories as well – stories of courage, fear, hope and despair. Whether we live in the Middle East or Zambia or Victoria, in our present age or in an exiled age long passed, there are fears and longings and sorrows that seem to be universal.

Fear of being abandoned – fear of being forgotten – seems to be one of our universal fears. The people of Israel were feeling that way as Ezekiel stood in the valley of dry bones. Israel was in exile. Nebuchadnezzar had captured Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried the people off to Babylon in captivity. The temple was in ruins. The people had lost everything. They were desperate. This was the funeral of their nation, the funeral of their social life, the funeral of their faith. Israel (as they knew it) was no more. “Where is God,” the people asked, “when the flesh rots off our bones and we are in the valley of death? Where is God, when everything is hot, dry, and parched? Not a blade of grass, a drop of water, or even the smallest desert flower. Where is God when even the animals live in holes underground?” These dry bones are the exiled people of Israel, who have no more hope of resuscitating the kingdom of Israel than of putting flesh on a skeleton and calling it to life.

The people of today’s *gospel* were feeling much the same way. Where was God, as Lazarus breathed his last, as Lazarus was anointed and wrapped in grave clothes and carried to the tomb? For four days, Lazarus lay in the tomb. For four days, the professional mourners shrieked and moaned and wept. Four days of despair for Martha and Mary and the friends who gathered there in Bethany. Where was Jesus when he was needed? Jesus, who preached resurrection, Jesus, who had been known to raise the dead, Jesus, who could have done something to help if he had just been there. Jesus finally shows up, but it seems as though it is too late. His beloved friend, Lazarus, is dead.

But walk on into the valley of dry bones with Ezekiel; follow Jesus to the tomb of Lazarus, and the stories of our scripture lessons make a turn. They are not stories of death at all. They are wonderful stories of life.

The vision of the dry bones is a promise of life for Israel. Ezekiel is the one who saw it first, the one who dared to believe that God *can bring* life in the midst of death. In Ezekiel’s vision, God comes to the graveyard of the people, and breathes new life. God’s Spirit blows in on the wind, breathing life-giving breath. Bones rattle and come together, tendons and muscles and skin flesh out into life. The vision is a sign that Israel will be revived. That God will carry Israel back to the land, and the nation will be restored.

The raising of Lazarus is a promise of things to come. Martha is the one to see it first. Martha is the one who dared to believe that Jesus was more than a friend, teacher, and prophet. Even when the disciples who spent every day with Jesus thought they had followed him into an experience of *death*, Martha saw that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The raising of Lazarus is not just a story of a family in crisis. It’s a kind of sneak preview. Jesus, on the way to his own death and resurrection, enters into the despair of one family to raise a friend to life. But there is more: this is a story of God who comes into our world to walk among the tombstones of our human history, breathing new life.

Lent is a time when the church looks into the darkness and death of our own lives and the world around us. Ezekiel and Lazarus remind us that apart from the presence of God, our lives are spent in the

graveyard, and all the world is a cemetery. Without the hope and light of God's spirit, Zambia will remain Zambia, a nation destined for extinction.

These stories also remind us that we are called to be people who proclaim life in the midst of death. We are called to be the Ezekiel's of our day, to be the Martha's. We are called to be the ones who see the presence of God walking among the tombstones of human life. We are called to be people proclaiming resurrection, people with a vision to see through the darkness of death, to see the possibility of new life in the valley of dry bones.

Please continue to support Presbyterian World Service & Development and other organizations that labour to bring healing and new life to those living with HIV and AIDS. Let us support all those working to bring about the Lazarus Effect around the world. Let us support them with our prayers and with our financial resources. Let us be careful as we cast our ballots on Election Day, asking that our tax dollars earmarked for international aid arrive at their intended destinations and are used wisely. And let us remember Laura today, as she explores the good work PWS&D is doing in Afghanistan and Pakistan.