

## Homily of Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year A 2023

### Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130:1-8; Romans 8:8-11; John 1-45

On Wednesday, March 18, 2020, weekday and Sunday Masses were suspended in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston due to Covid-19 Pandemic. From the Fourth Sunday of Lent (March 21/22, 2020), St. Francis of Assisi Church began to live stream Mass on Facebook. Online nightly Rosary began on Monday, March 23, 2020.

The pandemic was a horror and terrifying. The losses are unimaginable: loss of loved ones, loss of jobs, loss of businesses, loss of faith, setback for school children, ongoing health issues resulting from covid infection, and so on. Although we are now in post-pandemic, the after-shock is still with us. As believers, courage and faith are the tools to deal with the post-pandemic after-shock. God's word of encouragement in Isaiah says, "Say to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves!" (Isaiah 49:9). If you keep your doctor's appointments, if you go shopping, if you go to work, if you go to the post office and to the bank, if you go to the restaurant, if you go to school, if you attend parties and other gatherings, and so on, if you are not homebound due to age or illness, then come to church. The church building is safer than all those places you go to.

The first reading was Ezekiel's prophecy to the people of Israel while they were in exile in Babylon. They had resigned to hopelessness that they would never be free and would never return to their homeland. Ezekiel was one of the prophets God sent to give hope to the people. The images Ezekiel used to describe the people's situation, as we see in the reading, are death and grave. Ezekiel then prophesied spirit, life, and restoration. Ezekiel prophesied, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them... I will put my spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you upon your land..." This prophecy was fulfilled in about 597 BC when King Cyrus of Persia released the people of Israel to return to their land (Ezra 1:1-11).

In the gospel, Lazarus was dead and was four days in the grave. He was brought back to life by Jesus. It was a hopeless case before Jesus arrived. When Jesus was told that Lazarus was ill, he did not proceed immediately to visit Lazarus. It took him four days before he arrived at the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus ordered, "Take away the stone." He commanded, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus came out with hand and foot tied with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Finally, Jesus ordered, "Untie him and let him go."

The Israelites were seventy years in Babylon before they got their freedom. Lazarus was four days in the grave before Jesus brought him back to life. This means that sometimes, difficult times can last for a while. Sometimes, according to God's divine will, it takes a while before we receive what we pray for. Therefore, during difficult times, and when we have not received what we pray for, we are encouraged to stand strong in faith and persevere in prayer. Jesus promises in Matthew 24:13, "The one who perseveres to the end will be saved." May our faith and prayer move 'mountains' and uproot 'mulberry trees.' Amen.

The Israelites never believed that there was hope for them to return to their homeland. But when it was God's time, it came very fast and with unexpected blessings. The people of Israel did not fight for their freedom, and they left Babylon with so much gold and silver to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Following the decree issued by King Cyrus, the Babylonians provided the Israelites with silver and gold, goods and livestock, and freewill offerings for the temple. In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver (Ezra 1:6-11).

Also, in the gospel, nobody could have imagined that Lazarus would live again having been buried for four days, but Jesus brought him back to life. "With God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:6). God speaks to us through Prophet Ezekiel, "I will open your graves and have you rise from them... I have promised and, I will do it."

There is a helpful connection between the gospel of last Sunday and the gospel of today. Last Sunday, we read, "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him'" (John 9:3). Today, we read, "'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'" (John 11:4). As people of faith, we pray that our unpleasant situation turns around to be a blessing in disguise. May the works of God be made visible and God be glorified through our unpleasant situation. Amen.

The Israelites were under the yoke of slavery in Babylon. Lazarus was dead and, in the grave, covered by a stone. He was bound hand and foot, and his face wrapped in a cloth. We may have our kind of yoke enslaving us; we may be experiencing the sting of death and feeling like being in the grave; we may be feeling like we are weighed down by a large stone; we may be feeling like tied by hand and foot; we may be feeling like our face is wrapped in a cloth. As St. Paul prayed in the second reading, may the Spirit of the One who raised Christ from the dead give life to our mortal bodies. May the Spirit of the One who raised Christ from the dead break our yokes, raise us up from our graves, remove the stones weighing upon us, untie us, and set us free. Amen.

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