

“Death First, Then Life!”

Ezekiel 37:1-10, John 11:17-26

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The sermon title is a little scary. Please do not misunderstand me. I don't mean to say that quickly you have to die. This is not my point. Life is a great blessing of God. I want you all to live longer, as long as you want to. Death is a powerful image and spiritual metaphor for many dark shadows in our life. Every time we face our loved one's death, we experience the power of death. Although we are proud of our power and ability to change our life, death always reminds us of who we are; our limitation and our finality. How fragile we are in front of the power of death! In the Bible, the meaning of death has two different perspectives: one is our human side and the other is God's. We human beings experience fear and helplessness in the power of death. We cannot defeat nor change the power of death, but on God's side, death has no power. God has no limitation, but God is almighty to change what we cannot change. This morning, I am going to talk about the meaning of death and life from a spiritual perspective.

Lent is a spiritual season for the reflection of Jesus' life and death in our church calendar. Every year we observe forty days prior to Easter as a special journey to follow Jesus' footsteps. The highlight is not the glory of resurrection, but the key words are passion and death. Why do we continue to recall and remember this harsh part of Jesus' life every year? Why didn't God skip his son's suffering and death, but rescue human beings with His unconditional power of love? The scene of Jesus' suffering and death exactly represents our life journey. We all experience what Jesus went through with his people. There are times of difficulties, grief, suffering in despair, helplessness, or feeling that there is no exit in life, feeling no more hope for the future like standing at a dead-end. Jesus' death and resurrection shows us a big contrast between God and us. When Jesus thought everything was over, God just started a new beginning. In the Bible, God started making something new out of death. Today our Scripture readings talk about a common theme. I hope that we can learn some insights from the Scripture.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Ezekiel had a new vision from God for restoration of his nation. In his vision, God brought him out to a valley of the dried out bones. The dry bones represent Judah's or Israel's complete destruction. The Israelites lost their land and Jerusalem. Now they were exiles

in a foreign land. The valley of dried bones is a metaphor of Israelites' failure and despair, but this is not the end of God's story. God did something new with even this! When Ezekiel prophesizes, the bones and flesh come together. And it is as if God had breathed his own breath into the bodies. Lastly, when breath enters into the dead bodies, they live and stand as a great multitude.

Our New Testament story is about Lazarus' resurrection story. When Jesus arrived at Mary and Martha's house, their brother Lazarus had already been dead for four days, rotting in a tomb. Mary and Martha thought his life was over, but that was not true. Jesus brought him to life. Both of our Scripture readings give us the same message. We know that there is death always, but we also know there is life everywhere. When we feel that life is too hard and painful to go on, we need to call for the breath of God, breath of hope and life to make us live and stand on our feet. Then God will start making something new in us even though we think everything is over. Our end is not yet a final call, but it is a process of God's plan.

Speaking of breath of life, I couldn't forget the moment when my second son Joshua was born last month. It was a very anxious moment and at the same time, an amazing moment. But I also realized that a blessing of new life is not automatically granted to us. There always are processes or difficulties that we have to go through. When my wife was 6 weeks pregnant, she was told that she had gestational diabetes. She had to give herself insulin injections three times daily and blood glucose test four times a day for the last 6 months. Her pregnancy had been quite uncomfortable and a hard process. Even during labor and delivery, the medical staff was quite worried about baby's heartbeat. It was decided that the baby should be born immediately through c-section surgery. After the baby was delivered, it took the medical staff several minutes to get Joshua breathing and crying on his own. For me, it was an amazing moment to witness Joshua's own new journey into our world. I would say life is beautiful and wonderful, period.

But life also brings challenges. My experience may or not be familiar to all of you. When Jacob, my first son, was born, I could soothe him from his crying and frustration. But now it doesn't work well for Joshua. I have been thinking if God would give parents their first child already perfectly trained like potty training, never jealous, no crying, sleeping well, explaining his own needs, perfect vocabularies, and perfectly pleased with his food, etc. It would make all parents' lives much easier and babies' lives as well. How can it be possible? If you ask me what I have done the last five weeks during parental leave, I would say that I am becoming a master in the area of changing diapers and washing dishes. But I am still learning how to be very patient when Joshua cries too

much. Another challenge for a new life! To be honest with you, parenting is much harder than doing church ministry. Now I naturally admire how my parents raised their three boys including me.

A simple truth in our life is that there is no easy life. There are always some difficulties, challenges and times of suffering along our life journey. If you think that you are going through hard times in your life, believe that God is preparing you and training you to receive an incredible blessing when you are done with this work. In a spiritual perspective, death is a big barrier and obstacle that threatens us to stop, give up, and a negative power to mislead us to despair and hopelessness. Do you know why church keeps the season of Lent every year as a spiritual discipline? That is because we need to keep reminding ourselves of the need of discerning our suffering and death as a spiritual discipline to be like Christ Jesus. If there is no suffering and no death, there will be no glory of resurrection and joy of salvation. We have to overcome death. Therefore death first, then life! Amen.