

First Fifteen: March 29 – April 1
Focus Scripture: John 12:1-8

Monday: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Going Deeper: This vision from the Hebrew Prophet Ezekiel known as “The Valley of Dry Bones” is one of the more dramatic, as well as captivating visions from the Hebrew Prophets for me. The images within Ezekiel’s vision might conjure what we think as impossible... and yet they also affirm our foundational belief that nothing is impossible for God... including resurrection. As you read these verses where are you drawn to linger, what words capture your attention, or inspire your imagination? I am drawn to the question of God to us in verse 3... *“Human one, can these bones live again?”* (Ezekiel 37:3 – CEB) I hear this as a challenge or call to our faith. Do we believe in the restorative power of God to bring us back to life again? I am not talking about life after death, and neither are these verses. The agency within this call is based upon our trust in the movement, or presence of God’s Spirit which Ezekiel refers to as God’s *“breath.”* This vision calls us to imagine and trust the flowing of God’s breath or Spirit around and within us as our life-giving source. This fountain of grace and mercy we know as the Spirit, or Holy Spirit is the healing and restorative agent which has been and continues to be active moving, uniting, and empowering us to get up and move beyond the challenges and barriers we face. Calling us to discover resurrection now as we learn to live deeply and faithfully aware of all that God can do as well as calls us to do.

Prayer: My God of the impossible... “Can these bones live again?” Can I rise to the occasions and challenges of this day. Can I be all you have called me to become as your child, your agent of mercy and love today? The answer is YES, my Lord and my God through my faith in you which guides me and your loving mercy that helps me get back upon the path when I stumble or stray. My God of the impossible... Amen.

Tuesday: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Going Deeper: These words from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah are a reversal of those found in Jeremiah 17:1-4. They reveal a movement from mere obedience to a transformation grounded in an internalized awakening through an imprinting or writing of God’s law of love upon our hearts. They call for and recognize the difference between merely following a set of rules or guidelines to a growing awareness of an inner knowing and experience of what is just, right, and true. The transforming agent being our own experience of God’s love and grace. Theologically this experience is known both as being born again, which represents the initial awakening, and sanctification which is the process of growing closer to God and deeper in our faith and awareness of God’s loving presence. John Wesley referred to sanctification as “going on to perfection,” and by this he meant we are being perfected through love where all our actions, motives, and choices are guided by our understanding and experience of God’s love, both for ourselves and others. Both of these terms (born again & sanctification) refer to an experience freely given or shared with us by God; we simply need to ask and invite God to initiate the process, which has been God’s desire for us all along!

Prayer: Lord write your love upon and within my heart to guide me throughout this day. Help me to not lose faith in those moments when I am not at my best or when I become distracted. Help me trust your work within me never stops and all I am called to do is simply keep getting up and beginning again. Amen.

Wednesday: Isaiah 43:8-12

Going Deeper: The cry of Isaiah *“Bring out the blind people who have eyes, the deaf ones who have ears”* (Isa. 43:8 – CEB) remind me of Jesus’ call recorded in Matthew 11:15 *“Let the person who has ears hear.”* (CEB) And yet I recognize Isaiah’s intent is different. Isaiah, unlike Jesus who challenged those who thought they could see and hear to listen, Isaiah affirms those who others thought were deaf and blind but who actually saw the workings of God around them and kept the faith. Because of this, God calls these ones who see to be witnesses. Their trust in God and their willingness to believe God was with them, even when the people of God suffered under persecution and the rule of another is now the message they are to announce. When those around them turned to other sources of truth, or comfort, or security, or hope, they remained steadfast knowing God would bring them what they needed and most importantly, God was faithful, always faithful even when the people of God are not. As you read these words from Isaiah are you aware of areas, or places you need to hear this call to be faithful, where you have been tempted to trust another rather than God’s love and provision?

Prayer: My Lord of sound and light, help me stay focused and attentive today. Help me from falling into the trap of telling others I see when in truth all I have is my faith in you and your faithfulness, even when I stumble. Help me to live with a transparency that acknowledges those places of wondering and doubt and yet remains faithful even when I cannot see, knowing you can. Amen.

Thursday: John 13:1-9

Going Deeper: We understand the events within these verses as having taken place in the last week of Jesus’ life. He is gathered in table fellowship with his closest friends, his companions, his disciples and one whose allegiance had drifted. I have always been struck that Jesus, knowing of Judas’ impending betrayal, continued to love and care for him. He did not shun him; he didn’t even rebuke him as he had Peter (See Mark 8:27-33). John tells us Jesus in these last hours embodied his love and care for them as he *“showed them the full extent of his love.”* (John 13:1b – NIV) This became obvious to them initially through the act of washing their feet. Jesus the teacher, became Jesus the servant, even the servant of his betrayer. None of them speak up until Jesus came to Peter. Were they dumbstruck by this display of servant love or might it have been something else? John does not say, but Peter’s words help us. What do you hear in Peter’s objection and Jesus’ response? Jesus’ washing his disciple’s feet I suspect was far more than an object lesson on humility and servant focused discipleship. *“Unless I wash you, you won’t have a place with me.”* (Matt. 11:8b – CEB) Jesus is no longer talking about washing Peter’s feet. He tells Peter, and us that as a follower we are held

within his love, but there is something more going on here. I wonder if he is telling Peter, as well as all who are listening, the deepest level of faith and discipleship is complete surrender, realizing we must not fight or resist God's grace, it has been given. We do not, nor can we earn it, all must be washed in his love, our response is, and always will be to simply receive and be thankful.

Prayer: Surrender does not come easy my Lord. Help me as your disciple allow you to serve me, washing me completely in your love. Today as I find myself rising up help me remember your acts of servant love and leadership so I may surrender again into you call and leading as your follower to love, care for and guide even those who are against me. Amen.

Friday: Philippians 3:10-14

Going Deeper: In these words, written to the followers of Christ at the church in Philippi Paul is sharing his most earnest desire. His words are deeply personal and transparent. It may sound as if he is talking about his faith beyond his death, and in essence he is but not in the way most of us think about our death. What Paul is referring to is the shedding of our ego or dying to self so we can live both freely and fully within Christ and God's love for us. This is evident from Philippians 3:8 *"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost everything."* (NIV) In his words from verses 10 and 11 Paul reveals his passion regarding his faith in Christ, he seeks the power of his resurrection right here and right now, while at the same acknowledging he has yet to fully reach this longing in verses 13. What is Paul really telling us? He is saying, you can experience or know Jesus as the Risen Christ; you too can sense or feel his love and presence in your life throughout your day every day. This is what John Wesley was describing in what we know as his Aldersgate experience where his "heart was strangely warmed" in my understanding. *"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's 'Preface to the Epistle to the Romans'. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."* (The Works of John Wesley: Journals and Diaries, vols. 18-24 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988-2003) This example from John Wesley affirms what Paul is also describing for us, a desire to be all we can be by becoming free within God's love for us. This is the place of transformation that Paul understands as our resurrection. As we move closer to Easter it is my hope and prayer for all of us, that we too would long for this gift from God, and both the freedom and it's liberating power to live by faith and with authenticity.

Prayer: Lord of abundance fill me with hope, peace, kindness, and mercy so I may share your love and light with those around me. Help me integrate what I know and have experienced within your love in all I do. And Lord even as I have faith, I ask for more. Amen.

