

Message: “Renewed by Christ”

There’s good news! The Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona has been completed. The last scaffold has come down, and the structure stands in all its amazing glory. It is an architectural masterpiece, a wonder and it already draws crowds of sightseers from around the world. Many are awestruck by the play of light from the immense windows throughout the building.

Why is this good news? It’s a resurrection, of sorts. You see, it was designed by Antoni Gaudí. Construction began in 1882, with Gaudí taking over as chief architect in 1883. Gaudí knew he’d never see the completed structure, but he designed and built it anyway. When asked about this, he was said to have remarked, “The patron of this project is not in a hurry.”

Over the past 143 years, there have been many occasions when people looked at the project and despaired. Gaudi died knowing the work was incomplete. He had no children, so there were no direct descendants to take up the work.

Yet the vision of the Christ Cathedral drew people to it, and some took up the task. This is a form of resurrection, for the Spirit has led the work to complete it on the 100th anniversary of Gaudi’s death.

There are times when the journey of renewal seems long, dry and we despair of ever reaching the end. But Christ is faithful, renewing us by revealing glimpses of the glory to come in God’s kin-dom, where there is only light, life and love.

Earlier, we heard the words of psalmist who led the congregation as they sang, *“I hope, Lord. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord... Wait for the Lord! Because faithful love is with the Lord; because great [renewal] is with our God!”* (Psalm 130:5,7)

This is a pilgrimage song, and people would sing it as they traveled on the journey to Jerusalem for worship. The city is on a hill, so the journey always starts at a low point. Which is why it begins with *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O God”* (v1). It then crescendos as we rise to the heights of forgiveness and love, the marks of renewal.

What began as a personal journey becomes a communal journey, as we travel together. We rely on God's promises on our long journey and invite those we meet to join us. And so, we wait. We wait with hope. We wait for a transforming love, a redeeming, renewing love which can heal all brokenness and sinfulness, personal and communal.

But this waiting isn't passive, helpless or anxiety-riddled inaction. There's an active anticipation, a leaning into the possibilities, a search for the signs of change and hope. "*More than the night watch waits for morning*" (Psalm 130:6), implies lives are at stake. Not just the life of the watcher, the messenger, but the lives of our family, friends and neighbors as well. We must seek hope and share it.

This seeking, active looking, is the call to the church of today. We are called to identify that which brings life and redemption, and that which renews and lifts us up in a world that tears down. This seeking brings hope, rather than stoking fear.

No matter what depths we find ourselves in, personally, in your household or as a congregation, there is the possibility of life. This is the road to renewal we travel as followers of Jesus the Christ. This is what we chose to do and be. Disciples are to be the ones who seek this road, this Christ, this renewal. Not as an exclusive possession, but as a way of inviting and including the whole world, no matter how dim the possibilities seem to be.

Just ask Ezekiel. Standing in the valley of dry bones, he didn't dare claim hope for himself. "*Can these bones live?*" was the question he heard from the Spirit who brought him there. And his answer? "*You know, Lord.*" Ezekiel hands it back to the questioner. He didn't dare, on his own. He wouldn't dare bring himself to the place where he could say with any confidence there was still possibility there.

It was beyond him. Yet that was why he was brought to a place of death and dryness: to be the one who could hold out hope; to be the one who would declare resurrection.

It's a burden to carry hope in hopeless times. Everyone else is sure it's over. Everyone else is sure this is the end of everything. Like us, Ezekiel is asked to stand against that certainty, declare life in the face of death and call to the One who gives life.

Prophecy to the breath, to the wind, to the Spirit. Declare what is life-giving in the face of what is death-dealing. Invite that which is transforming and reconciling into the lifeless body that has forgotten how to hope in the kingdom of God. Bind the bones together into a kingdom of caring and hospitality. This is our call.

It's hard work, though. It's too hard for any of us to do on our own. Maybe this is the source of Jesus' tears in John's gospel?

Does the onerous task of carrying hope for a hopeless world weigh so heavily that even Jesus weeps? Not simply for a friend who has died, or even for the slow to believe, but the sheer effort of prophesying to the spirit in a valley of dry bones. Carrying the weight of expectation, disappointment, misunderstanding, and mis-prioritizing, Jesus weeps with weariness and love.

Let's be honest: we don't know. But it gives us pause. We hold our breath in the face of his tears, just as much as we are in awe when he gets to his feet and raises Lazarus from the dead.

Take away the stone. That's Jesus' call to all of us who would hope with him. Take away the stone. That's his word to those of us who would lean into life with him and proclaim possibility, transformation, grace, forgiveness and renewal with him. Take away the stone.

What stones? What's blocking us today? What keeps people from hearing the invitation to life? What's in the way of building community, loving our neighbor, serving the hurting, ignored, scapegoated and forgotten children of God who are the face of Christ for us? What are the stones to be removed so Jesus can call life out of death, saving us?

Paul says our flesh is the stone. He isn't implying our bodies are bad, but our appetite-driven decisions, our me-first choices, are often not the best ones. Paul says Christ calls us from the tombs of our narrow vision and self-centered living to step out into the light of the Spirit which redeems, renews, unites and builds up in Jesus' love.

We need to be unbound from traditions no longer serving us and lean into traditions enlivening our spirits. We're called to be a sign God is at work in the world, the evidence renewal is possible. We're called to be life-givers in the best sense of the word.

We are called to a new way, walking in Jesus' footsteps as we rise from the spiritual dryness and depths of the world to know God's mercy, love and glory. The description of dry bones coming to life is a potent image of resurrection. In this season, the dry bones can also speak to us of the weariness of holding out hope and our need for the Spirit's breath to keep hope alive, inspiring us to continue our journey of renewal.

Isaiah said, “*I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing. Yet, the Lord will grant me [mercy]. My reward is with my God... And God has decided to restore [us]*” (Isaiah 49:4, CEB).

What does this mean? It sounds like “I’m not worthy” shifts to “I’m called anyway.” The task is beyond me, but I am called anyway. The vision is bigger than I am, but I am called anyway. The light is beyond me, but I am called to carry the light until rulers see and bow before the goodness and glory of God. I may never see that day in this life, but I will carry the light anyway.

Together, may we be renewed in Christ. Amen.

Let us pray ...

Psalms 130 (CEB)

I cry out to you from the depths, Lord -
my Lord, listen to my voice!

Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

If you kept track of sins, Lord -
my Lord, who would stand a chance?

But forgiveness is with you -
that's why you are honored.

I hope, Lord.

My whole being hopes,
and I wait for God's promise.

My whole being waits for my Lord -
more than the night watch waits for morning;
yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

Israel, wait for the Lord!

Because faithful love is with the Lord;
because great redemption is with our God!

He is the one who will redeem Israel
from all its sin.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord's spirit, God led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. God led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

God asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?"

I said, "Lord God, only you know."

God said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.'"

I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them.

God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."

I prophesied just as God commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company.

God said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: 'I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says.'"

John 11:1-3,11-14,32-37,40-45 (CEB)

A certain man, Lazarus, was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was ill.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.” ...

He continued, “Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up.”

The disciples said, “Lord, if he’s sleeping, he will get well.” They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was in a deep sleep, but Jesus had spoken about Lazarus’ death.

Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died.” ...

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, “Where have you laid him?”

They replied, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?” ...

Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.” Having said this, Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his feet bound and his hands tied, and his face covered with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Untie him and let him go.”

Therefore, many of the Jews who came with Mary and saw what Jesus did believed in him.