

It is great to be able to preach a sermon again. It has been two months for all of us to be able to listen to some great sermons as we celebrated 160 years of ministry here at ACPC. I bet many of us would say that the best sermons preached in this sanctuary over the past year were preached over these past 2 months.

It was great to hear you preach David Riddle. I have never heard David preach a sermon before. What a blessing in my life you have been David. As many of you know, David comes by here every Tuesday morning to restore old computers with Deke Rivers. David is a retired Presbyterian pastor and a clinical psychologist. To my knowledge I am the only pastor I know who gets a weekly house call by a clinical psychologist. And David dispenses these words of wisdom weekly to me and he doesn't even charge me or the church. David, you are a blessing and it was a blessing to hear you preach here. Thanks for leading music again while Gaither tends to his ailing son-in-law.

It was also a blessing to hear some of your former pastors preach. Alan Arnold is so folksy. Alan is a storyteller and it was such a treat to hear him spin a story or two about events that happened while he was pastor here. Who can forget Alan leading the children around the sanctuary as he led them to sing about how Father Abraham had many children and we are all one of them. I wasn't sure if Alan would actually make it back to the pulpit because he kept stopping to talk to people in the sanctuary.

After Grant Sharp preached my daughter Rebecca said he reminded her of a black preacher in an old white man's body. I will never be able to read Luke 4 again without hearing the voice of Grant saying, "Go back to hell, Satan. Go back to hell." It was a blessing to meet and hear Jack Sadler, a member of the Jackson family and to hear Hutch again.

And what about 2 weeks ago when we had the one "I" Simrils joining in worship with the two "I" Simrills. This sanctuary was filled with white folks and black folks singing and dancing and there was joy in this sanctuary as years of division were melted in that time of worship.

And what courage it took for David and Anne Morgan to come here and lead worship last Sunday. I have heard lots of things said to me about David and Anne so it was a blessing to actually hear them preach a sermon for the first time. They helped me have a greater appreciation of what it means to be a prodigal.

These two months of celebration were such a blessing in so many ways in this congregation. I know that I needed to hear some great sermons and experience worship that I was not in charge of leading. I needed to listen to other people preach and not be in charge because when you preach sermons and lead worship for 21 years without a real break it can begin to drag on you.

But these two months have been a period of real refreshment for me so I thank you for providing me this two months of spiritual regeneration. Your contributions paid for all of these pastors to come and it also allowed for me to connect deeper to the God who has called me into ministry. Thank you for allowing me to seek my own spiritual nourishment that I needed.

These two months were proof, also, that ministry in this church is not dependant on a pastor. During these two months you had your most successful Bluegrass concert in terms of income into the kitchen. You hit \$1000 for the first time ever. You had your most successful Dimes for Hunger collection when you topped \$600. You had your most successful pine straw sale when you sold 3,600 bales of pine straw.

But it wasn't just money that demonstrated your success. It was also your level of commitment. I got to see and participate with the volunteers working with the pine straw. I got to work with Tommy and Richard and Pete and Deke and Doug and Steve and Bryan and Bob and Foster and Mark and Jr. I know I am leaving some out.

You all worked for days and weeks to make that sale the most successful ever. Whenever I see Foster's long red trailer I know that something good is happening. Whether it is hauling pine straw to help the church or hauling material to Mississippi to repair homes after a hurricane.

And I also know that it is such a blessing to me that my son begs me for permission to participate in the pine straw sale and I can leave him on that truck and trust that he will be cared for by the men around him. Thank you for all that you do.

I decided for this first Sunday back that I would preach from whatever texts were assigned to the lectionary for this Sunday. The lectionary are the passages of Scripture from the Old and New Testaments that have been assigned to each day of worship. Today the two passages from the Old Testament and the gospel are the stories which we have already read.

In the Ezekiel passage, the nation of Judah is really scared. They are scared because they believed that God would always protect them from any harm. They believed that the proof that their God was the strongest god in the region was in how God would protect them from any calamity.

And the proof of how great and mighty they were was the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. The community and the church. The people in Judah built this big and tall and mighty Temple within the walls of Jerusalem which gave them reassurance that God would always protect them. They believed that God would not allow anything difficult to come upon them.

Well guess what. Judah got conquered by the Babylonians. And being defeated destroyed the worldview of the residents of Judah. If their Temple falls apart then God must not be the strongest god in the region. If their Temple falls apart then God must not really be in their Temple or in the community. If their Temple falls apart then they are alone. If their Temple falls apart then God may have relocated to another community. A church building with God in it must never face destruction, or so they thought.

But Ezekiel speaks words of prophecy to them. Ezekiel says hold on there. God has not departed them just because their Temple has fallen apart. Ezekiel says that God will breathe new life into these dry bones. Now the people say back, “but wait. Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. We are cut off completely from God.”

But God responds to their cries by saying, “I am going to open your graves. I will bring you up from the graves. I will put my spirit in you and I will replant you. And then, the Lord says, you will know that I am the Lord.”

In our second lesson today, a man is sick. His name is Lazarus. Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha. Mary was the same Mary that massaged the Lord’s feet and then wiped them with her hair. Mary was a devoted follower of Jesus and she trusted that he would be there when she needed him to be.

Lazarus becomes sick and Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that he is sick. “Master, they say, the one that you love so very much is sick.” You need to come right now and do something about it because if you wait too long he may die.

Well Jesus does wait. “The sickness is not fatal” Jesus says. Can you imagine what Mary and Martha thought as they watched their brother get sicker and sicker and sicker? And as Lazarus gets sicker and sicker and sicker, what does Jesus do? Jesus stays where he was for two more days. Jesus waits before acting.

Jesus then tells his disciples that he will return to Judea but the disciples are now anxious. “You can’t do that Jesus. The Jews are out to get you.” Jesus replies to these anxious disciples and says to them, “we are going.” But then Jesus says, “We are not going to go by night. Nothing will be done in the darkness,” Jesus says. “We will walk that way but we will walk in the light. Because if we try to do anything in the darkness, Jesus says, we might very well stumble.

Jesus then tells his disciples that Lazarus is asleep. “Well, if he is asleep,” they say, “then leave him alone.” But then Jesus tells them straight up, “Lazarus is dead.” When Jesus finally arrives, Lazarus has been dead for 4 days. Lazarus is dead longer than Jesus was dead.

And when Jesus arrives, Mary and Martha are furious with him. Jesus, “how could you be so slow at a time like this? We needed you to come days ago, weeks ago. If you had come when we asked you to come then our brother Lazarus would still be alive. Lazarus is dead, Jesus, because you did not act in time”

When Jesus encounters the anger of Mary and Martha, what does he do? Jesus weeps. He doesn’t express anger back at them for being faithless. Jesus hears their anguish and Jesus weeps. Some of the people who observed this said to themselves, “Well if he really loved this man so much then he should have kept this man from dying.”

Jesus then arrives at the tomb. It was a simple tomb. Jesus then directs others to remove the stone. It smells really, really, bad. Nasty bad. The stench is bad because he has been dead for so long.

Jesus says to Martha, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed that you would see the glory of God?” Jesus again directed others to remove the stone. Notice how Jesus does not do any of work of removing the stone. He depends on others to do that.

“Lazarus, come out!” Jesus shouts. And Lazarus comes out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe. And then Jesus says, “Unbind him and let him loose.”

Mary and Martha are scared in this story. They are scared because their brother is sick and they could do nothing about it. They cry out to Jesus and expect Jesus to show up and do something about it. Jesus does not respond in a timely fashion and as a result of his slowness, Lazarus dies.

But Jesus does not get concerned about people and places dying. Remember our Old Testament lesson? The Temple was destroyed and the people thought that a destroyed Temple meant that God was not there in that Temple and in the community. Jesus seems to say, however, that out of death, new life occurs. Jesus seems to say that death actually needs to happen first before new life can occur.

Mary and Martha were focused on death. This focus on death led them to become very scared and very angry. This focus on death left Mary and Martha very scared and very angry.

Jesus, however, is focused on the resurrection. According to Jesus, what appears to some to be death is merely sleeping. Jesus says the sickness is really an occasion to show God’s glory by glorying God’s son. Jesus reveals at this death that he is the resurrection and that he is the new life. Jesus is the resurrection and Jesus is the new life!!!

Death or resurrection? Where are we focused? Are we focused on death like Mary and Martha or are we focused on resurrection and new life like Jesus?
AMEN.

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-Text: Ezekiel 37 and John 11

-Given: April 6, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)