

**Message for March 26, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church 5<sup>th</sup>  
Sunday in Lent  
“New Life in the Wilderness” Rev. Trish Eckert**

Today’s Bible Wisdom teachings are resurrection stories. God is always at work, searching relentlessly for the lost parts of ourselves, our communities, the earth and everything in it – and breathing life into us.

This week as I contemplated the words of the prophet, Ezekiel, relaying what he heard and saw and experienced, I also got in touch with the ways that we, in our present time and place, have been coming back to life. This month marks the third year living with the realities of COVID. In many ways, as we strive to understand the countless ways that our lives have changed since the initial lockdown, we are still finding our way back to vibrant and connected community life. We once again have sinew and skin and breath. We are walking among the living and seeking ways to live in hope. We have the opportunity once again to consider what life might look like if we realized Spirit within us and within each other.

As we continue to explore the many facets of our wilderness theme this Lenten season, I turned to one of my favorite books, “Women Who Run with the Wolves,” written by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, a psychoanalyst, storyteller, and poet. Her text is filled with indigenous stories, and she encourages the reader on their journey of self-discovery, providing tools that heighten our intuition and honor our instincts. In describing the purpose of stories, she explains that “Stories are medicine.” She goes on to write, “...to further our kinship relationship with the instinctual nature, it assists greatly if we understand stories as though we are inside them, rather than as though they are outside of us. We enter into a story through the door of inner hearing. The spoken story touches the auditory nerve, which runs across the floor of the skull into the brainstem just below the pons [part of the central nervous system]. There, auditory impulses are relayed upward to consciousness or else, it is said, to the soul...depending on the attitude with which one listens.”

I think that the Prophet Ezekiel was speaking to the souls of his listeners, striving to bring God’s word and God’s love and God’s elemental provision to the people who so desperately needed it. Keep in mind that Ezekiel lived at the time of the Babylonian Exile, which actually took place in two waves - the first in 597 B.C. and the second, in 587 B.C. Ezekiel continued his

prophetic ministry for about 30 years - until well after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Today's reading from the prophet is all about coming back to life – finding new life, being animated and gathered and connected. The dry bones coming to life symbolizes restoration, and points to new life in the wilderness.

Our Gospel reading tells another story of new life. The raising of Lazarus is a “Big Story.” It takes place at a pivotal place in John's narrative. The action has begun to intensify; Jesus has just narrowly escaped stoning, and he will soon make his triumphal, if short-lived, entry into Jerusalem. The primary goal of the story is to display Jesus' power: to demonstrate, as a friend of mine once observed, that Jesus isn't much impressed with death.

Again this week, the lectionary listed a long series of verses from the Gospel of John, so we just listened to 13 of the 45 verses that were assigned to this week's lection. I think the story of Lazarus is familiar to most of us –at the time of this account, Jesus is just two miles from Jerusalem, where we know he will be crucified. This story of the resurrection of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of what is to come. Jesus is close to Lazarus, a dear friend, along with the sisters of Lazarus: Mary and Martha, who have sent for Jesus, asking him to come and heal their brother.

The disciples are perplexed at Jesus' willingness to go back to the area where they had all just been run out of town. And in this text, Thomas is the disciple who says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” But Jesus delays his departure, and he's days away before arriving at their compound – a place he has visited many times. The depth of their connection is further revealed once Jesus arrives and when he sees Mary grieving and crying, Jesus weeps. Ultimately, upon his arrival, he is called upon to perform a miracle.

We're in chapter 11 of this Gospel, and the first 12 chapters of John are often called “The Book of Signs,” among them, changing water into wine, feeding the five thousand, and as we heard last week, healing the man born blind. The account of this last and greatest sign is much longer than any of the previous accounts of signs—a mark of its significance.

I am intrigued by the web of relationships among the participants in this text. There are Mary and Martha, whose story is bound together with the unbinding of their brother, as we witness the presence of women at another

tomb that lies not too distant. I am curious about the friendship that these siblings shared with Jesus, how their home seems to have been for Jesus a particular place of hospitality, comfort, familiarity, and, as John points out, love.

There is Thomas, seemingly destined to forever carry the title “Doubting Thomas,” who ought to be better known as the one who, in this story, demonstrates his willingness to die with Jesus.

There is Jesus, whose presence in the story is marked by waiting and weeping.

And then there is Lazarus. Though the story hinges largely on him, for most of it he is a passive background figure. We never hear his voice, and it is only at the end of the story that he finally becomes really interesting, when he is faced with the choice of whether or not to come out of the tomb.

This story is one of my favorites, not just because it’s a Big Story but because of the way that so many stories come together within it. This is not just Almighty Jesus at the height of his powers, showing off what he is capable of; this is Jesus reaching into the depths of who he is, pouring himself out on behalf of those with whom he is most intimately in relationship. Jesus enacts Lazarus’ raising, but he does so in the context of a community. Jesus calls Lazarus forth, but he calls upon those around Lazarus—sisters, kinfolk, neighbors—to unbind him and let him go.

The raising of Lazarus is indeed a Big Story. It unfolds, however, in the context of patterns of relationships, choices, habits, and personalities that influence how each character participates in and responds to Lazarus’ raising. Our own lives are built on these same details. We each garb ourselves in routines and practices that carry us through our relationships, our work, our hungers, our lives. Those routines and practices influence how we receive and respond to God’s call. We may be swathed in layers of habits that may have once fit us, habits we may once have found beautiful, habits we may yet be attached to long past their usefulness but which now insulate and shroud us from the presence of God.

The season of Lent beckons us to reckon with our most entrenched habits as individuals and communities: to sort through them and to recognize that Christ, in all his humanity and all his divinity, has power even over them.

This season reminds us that the miraculous and the mundane are intimately intertwined. We are called to wrestle with the very details that shape our lives together, that new life may emerge.

Certainly, our theme of wilderness invites us to consider our inner landscapes, our personal journeys, our relationships, our connection to our loved ones as well as to the stranger and even those we perceive as enemies – all of whom make up our communities and all of which culminates in the need to discern how we want to live and move and function in these communities. In reflecting on our individual interior lives, we build the capacity to shape our community lives, including here at Tippe. So, I invite each of us to consider:

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

In your daily living, what patterns are life-giving and help you notice the presence of God? Which habits keep you bound? What helps you hear the voice of Christ who stands at the threshold between death and life? What will help you choose to come forth, and to help someone else do the same? Are there people who can help with the