**Tracing the Rainbow through the Rain**

What a difficult time, what a scary time this is.

This week I have been feeling so unprepared for the lockdown we’re now in. I’m kicking myself for all sorts of things. The bulb I didn’t bother to buy for my bedside lamp, back when the bulb blew and it would have been easy to get! The frustration and anger that I got lost in last weekend when people were making decisions different to mine about how to respond to the emerging situation with COVID-19.

Turning to the stories of our tradition makes so much sense to me at this time. In the readings from the lectionary, we hear fear, we hear grief, we hear calls for help.

I’ve never heard the word “unprecedented” as often as I have over the past fortnight. Yes, this is an unprecedented time for contemporary Aotearoa – with the physical isolation of households, and our borders basically closed.

What I don’t think is unprecedented are our responses - how each of us is feeling, and indeed how our communities are rallying. There is not much new in how humans cope with fear – do we turn – in fear – to look after just ourselves and what we want? Or find ways to live with fear and live for others, as well as ourselves?

Let’s turn to the readings we heard just now.

“Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.” That’s a bit of a downer, isn’t it? And you might have found the whole reading from Ezekiel a bit of a downer, if you’re not taken with the idea of the physical resurrection of the body. But guess what? Neither would the writer of the book of Ezekiel have been. That idea, the doctrine of resurrection, was not part of Jewish thinking until post-biblical times.

Ezekiel was a prophet and a priest who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 and the early years of Babylonian exile. Scholars see consistency in much of the book of Ezekiel – for all its strangeness – though the book may be a product of multiple writers who continued to write in the style of Ezekiel. At any rate, the book wrestles with the big questions posed by the destruction of Jerusalem: Why did God allow these awful things to happen? What future is there for the people of Israel?

These prophetic words, then, are words to people in despair when life as they knew it is gone. Not just turned upside down, but gone. In the destruction of the Temple, God’s own dwelling place, their world had shattered.

So can you set aside the concept of physical resurrection, and hear these words again?   
“I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil.”

Ezekiel says to his community – you may be hopeless, but I see a future worth living for you, for you as a community. The prophet reminds his people that God has a covenant with them. They are not forgotten. The rainbow, on the cover of the order of service today, is a symbol of the covenant between God and all the Earth, which we remember from the story of Noah.

“I will put my breath into you and you shall live again” – did you notice this resonates with the second Creation story in Genesis? From Genesis, chapter 2: “God formed a person from the dust of the Earth. God blew into their nostrils the breath of life.” Ezekiel uses the same Hebrew word for breath. In reflecting Genesis, Ezekiel is invoking the very essence of who we are as humans, the divine spark within us all.

“I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, *and I will set you upon your own soil*.” – the community still exists, even though it is in exile now. There is a better tomorrow.

What is the community in the reading we heard from John this morning? This is a really interesting bit of John. In terms of context, let’s situate ourselves. First, John is far and away the most different of the four gospels. Mark, Matthew and Luke are the synoptic gospels and have a lot of overlapping material. John was written later than the others and has a different focus. As a general introductory comment, it’s worth being aware that it has been mainstream in theology since the century before last to see the Synoptic gospels as containing elements of the historical person of Jesus and the gospel of John as not containing much of this at all.

This story about Lazarus isn’t in the synoptic gospels. I don’t want to get caught up in whether there was something that literally happened that inspired this story. After all, it is recent in our faith tradition that that point of literalness would be as big a deal as we sometimes make it.

The overarching theme of John’s gospel is “who is Jesus?” What is the uniqueness of his relationship with God and what does that means for our relationship with the sacred?

So what might be some of the things that John conveys about Jesus from this passage? I’m going to talk about just two of them. First, Jesus had friends, friends who were really dear to him. The author of John ascribes fancy words to Jesus and how he talked about God, but the core context of this story is friendship. It tells us that Jesus hung out with people who didn’t fit the norm. Martha, Mary and Lazarus, as three unmarried adults, were an unusual household for their time and place. The text doesn’t directly discuss why they have this unconventional way of life.

Let’s think about the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. I want to be a bit imaginative. Did these siblings live together because they had some sort of spiritual commitment which they could fulfil better without the ties of marriage and children? Did they have particular roles in their community? What do you think?

The theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has written about the hermeneutics of experience. We know that Scripture was created and written and solidified within patriarchal societies. Yet if we start with own experience, we can re-imagine the experiences of those in the margins of those societies. We can expand on the feminist possibilities that have survived in these texts.

When I read about these three unmarried adults living together, I wonder if Mary and Martha really were sisters, or if that became a convenient way to explain two women who had a committed life together. Women couples have, over centuries, presented themselves as living as sisters for their own safety.

I realise you may think I’m going way too far and that you totally don’t get how I could see that. Sweet as. I want to tell you, though, that my rainbow family is also often “not seen,” even though we live in a society that is broadly tolerant of same-sex couples and my family legally exists. I recall a Presbyterian hui about the church’s treatment of LGBT people that my partner and I went to with our children. I was so happy to be there, making a strong statement that rainbow families are proudly part of the PCANZ! Soon someone came up to me and said how nice it was that my friend had come with me to support me given I’d brought my kids. I was somewhat deflated but I came out and talked about my family. Unlike in most of my daily life, I am acutely aware of my vulnerability when I come out in church settings. But it is a conversation I am called to have.

Returning to the story, the second thing I want to highlight about Jesus is that he worked with others. His mission needed community.

“Lazarus, come out!” This is a call for Lazarus to lead a new life. Jesus calls him out of the tomb to live a life true to himself, true to the shining spark of God within him.

I love what happens next in this story. Jesus says, “unbind him, and let him go free.” Jesus doesn’t do this alone. Lazarus is not going to do this alone either. The people who are gathered around to watch – his community – have to actively support him into his new life. Following Jesus, we are called to support people throughout their struggles, their recoveries and in their steps towards new life.

Right now, a lot of us are struggling in different ways. I see so much potential for hating on those who are outside the sudden new rules…. people with nowhere to go, people who are too scared by what’s inside their houses. The us and the them. The us - those that are managing and doing the right thing and are adequately providing for our families but definitely not panic buying, and the them who are not doing the right thing. The blaming of some groups of people for COVID-19, because of their ethnicity, because of how recently they have returned to New Zealand, because we have a tendency to look out in fear and blame others. That is the way of crucifixions.

The ideas of Jesus as a friend to those who were outside the mainstream, and Jesus in community, mean a lot to me at this time. Jesus totally disrupted the ideas of “us” and “them” in his society.

May the Easter hope of ending the “us and them” ways sustain us and our world in the week ahead. May we see glimpses of the rainbow of hope in this time of suffering. May we be the community needed to bring each other to wholeness. Amen.

We’re now going to watch The Glamaphones singing in St Andrew’s last Thursday, 19th March. If the video doesn’t play, you can watch it on The Glamaphones Facebook page. They had decided last Thursday would be their final rehearsal given the emerging situation with COVID-19. I’m sad not to be in our church this morning with you. I find it comforting, however, that St Andrew’s, the building, wasn’t walked out on. It was sung in with love and strength by people who knew they would not be coming back for a while.