

## **“You Shall Live”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 26, 2023 - Fifth Sunday in Lent

[Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45](#)

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” This famous statement by Ben Franklin, written by him in a letter in 1789, was a riff off of words originally written by British actor and playwright Christopher Bullock decades before in 1716. It certainly was true in 1716 and in 1789 that death and taxes were to be experienced by all, and this remains true in 2023 and will likely be so in the years to come as well. Young Connor, baptized this very morning, surely can look forward, throughout his years of life on this planet, to paying taxes. And sure as the new spring season will turn to summer and then to fall and winter, so too shall the years of Connor’s life, like all of our lives, be marked by changing seasons, ending with the lifelessness of winter. But in the uncertain years of our lives, there is more than just death and taxes that Connor and the rest of us are sure to experience.

Our (very long) scripture lessons offer us stories that tell us of another inevitability of this life, and that is that God, who breathed life upon us all in our first moments will continue to do so until (and beyond) our last. The Breath or Spirit of God is upon us and within us, empowering us, throughout the days of our lives, to truly live in ways that lead us to experience and enjoy the abundant blessings of life, which is God’s deep desire for all of us.

Our first lesson tells us about the prophet Ezekiel, who was led by the Spirit of God to a dry and desolate valley full of bones, dry bones of people that were no longer paying taxes, no longer taking in the Breath of God, whose lives had passed and had no life in the present nor an expectation of life in the future. These dry bones were the people of Israel, who in Ezekiel’s time were conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire, taken by the Babylonians from their ruined land and living in exile without hope for a future as a people. But just as God formed and as breathed life upon Israel as a people, God promised to reform Israel, reforming their lifeless dry bones as people and a people and breathing life into them once more.

Today's gospel lesson from John also tells us of God's regenerative acts. In the lesson, we heard how Jesus' friend Lazarus had died and was buried when Jesus came to him and called for him to come out of his tomb. Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, offered new life to Lazarus, who came forth from his tomb, still wrapped in the cloths of a mummy but dead no more.

Yes, taxes and death are inevitable, but so is renewal when God calls it to happen. The God who promised renewal to the dry bones of the house of Israel and who renewed life in a mummified Lazarus still promises new life, still breathes life upon us, still calls the dry bones to rise up, and still calls us to come forth from our tombs and to take off our burial cloths. We can count on God's renewing acts in our lives, just as sure as we can count on the renewal of the earth with the coming of spring each year, as God says to us and to all of creation: "You shall live" (Ezekiel 37:5, 6, 14).

Even as we continue to destroy one another with our warring ways, even as we use our deadly weapons in homes and schools to feel powerful by enacting our wrath upon others, and even as we make war on the planet itself -- even now, with so much self-caused pain and sorrow in this world, Jesus weeps for us (John 11:35) but then says, "You shall live!"

We are not told that we might live, or that maybe we could live, but that we *shall* live. This is God's certain will *for us*. This is God's sure work *among us*. This is God's ongoing and steadfast work *in us*. And it is true for our world, its nations, and each of its people. God calls us all to have life and God empowers us all to have to life.

So linger no longer in whatever tomb you find yourself in this morning. Unwrap whatever stinky old burial cloths are keeping you bound. Rise up and go out of the cold, dark tomb to enjoy the warmth of the springtime light. Be engaged in God's work of unbinding others, wrapping others in a shawl of God's love, helping people to experience the blessings of life that God calls them to enjoy as well.

May we always heed the voice of our still-speaking, still-calling, still-blessing God to be made new and to go out and make things new. And as we go and serve the God of life, may we experience God's life in abundance. Amen.