

One of my favorite things to do if I have a little bit of time during lunch is watch videos produced from the Dodo, a website that quote "serves up emotionally and visually compelling, highly sharable animal related stories and videos to help make caring about animals a viral cause." Definitely works on me! I mean, who can't help but love a video of an abandoned dog with matted fur frozen to the ground getting rescued and cleaned up and adopted? Or a kitten that loves to go surfing with her human dad?

In one of the most memorable videos, a leopard is stuck in a pit with several feet of water on the bottom. It is trying so hard to get out, clawing at the walls for something to grab onto. It's tired. It's scared. You can't help but feel its despair. There was literally no way for it to get out alone. It felt like such a hopeless situation.

I imagine there are some of us who are feeling pretty hopeless right now. Feeling like we are in a valley or a pit of despair. It's easy to see why? After all, church doors remain closed on Sundays. We are encouraged not to be in community with each other. No hugs! No one on one visits. No seeing our children and grandchildren! No random road trips. Perhaps we now are unemployed or facing unemployment. We are deeply worried about the financial future of this country and our church. With uncertainties come anxieties. And sometimes, we assume the worst will happen. There is no hope.

That's why Psalm 130 can resonate with us "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord." We may feel like we are in the depths! When we are grieving (and we ARE grieving right now), or weary, or lacking hope...it may feel like we are like Ezekiel, gazing upon a valley full of dry bones. The life is out of us. We are defeated.

But the story doesn't just end with Ezekiel looking at the valley...God reminds Ezekiel of the power to give life! Life over death. Hope over despair.

That's what Mary and Martha were needing when their brother Lazarus was sick. They were worried, anxious, and scared about him dying. That's why they sent for Jesus. They knew Jesus had the power to cure their brother. Yet he didn't come. And Lazarus had died. Mary and Martha understandably were disappointed. They felt despair. It felt hopeless.

Then it was the disciples' turn. Jesus was set to go to Judea, the same place where Jesus' life was threatened, and perhaps even their own lives threatened. They did not quite understand what was going on or why Jesus wanted to go to an unsafe place. But, even with their confusion and concern, they went. "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Such a defeatist attitude. It felt hopeless.

I think we can relate to these readings.

Valleys of despair...confusion...frustration...anxiety...sadness...death. So much unknown. So much to be afraid of. We may not be fearing our own deaths, but we may fear what comes before it, or the death of a loved one. It all just seems hopeless.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” This psalm begins with despair and longing and hopelessness, but it ends with faith and hope- “I wait for you, O Lord; my soul waits; in your word is my hope.” The psalmist could see that beyond their difficult circumstances, stood hope and life that comes only through God.

God had the power to raise those dry bones to life in that valley and Jesus had the power to raise Lazarus from the grave. Jesus sees beyond death...beyond the frustrating circumstances of this world. And this surely must give us hope...and through that, faith.

Mary and Martha were in the hopeless situation when their brother died. They were heartbroken over his death, but I’m sure they were also heartbroken, frustrated, confused, why Jesus didn’t come when he was called for. Well, Jesus never does what is easy...**he does what gives faith.** And so he took his time getting to Judea...all the while, leading his disciples feelings of concern and defeat...and he arrived at the tomb to see Martha, Mary, and the other mourners. Jesus, himself, wept with them. How profound...and how meaningful for us to understand in times of our suffering and grief...BUT! While Jesus is grieving, others wonder why he hadn’t hurried to heal Lazarus. Why he hadn’t made the effort. They didn’t understand Jesus’ power. They had understood death to be final and that people cannot come back to life.

Jesus saw beyond death and gave life back to Lazarus, and through this act, led people to believe. To Jesus, death is not the final word. God’s ultimate power reigns.

And that is stronger than the valleys of despair, grief, anxiety, fear, and hopelessness.

Through this saving, life giving act, people believed and hope was restored.

Jesus raises us up, rescues us from our pits, our valleys and gives us life.

Perhaps when we least expect it, but Jesus is there all the while. Supporting us...

working in ways which may not be obvious to us.

Every time a crisis or disaster of some sort hits, someone on Facebook always shared this Fred Rogers quote..."When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

The leopard in the Dodo video did not die in the pit. In fact, there were people who saw it's desperation and were moved to help it. So they build a ladder for it to climb out of the pit. Without that help, the hopeless leopard would certainly have died.

In this time of crisis, when we feel hopeless and anxious, when we feel like we are in valley of dry dead bones, look for the people who are helping. I guarantee they are out there. I'd like to think that God is using them to remind us it will be ok. To give us hope. To help us move forward. To allow God to use us. To give us faith. To pull us out of the pit. To give us life.

God is more powerful than all of the frustrations and worries of this world. God is with us in this, breathing life where we need it. See the life that God gives us and have faith.