



## SERMON PLANNING GUIDE

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BIBLICAL COMMENTARY BY GUEST CONTRIBUTOR, SLATS TOOLE  
LENT YEAR A

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

For the Revised Common Lectionary scriptures for Lent, Year A, this guide offers you biblical commentary, theme connections, and links to further reading. For each text, we've included suggestions for how to connect the scripture to the theme, *Wilderness*. These suggestions offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme.

We encourage you to use this guide as a starting point for your text study each week. You may wish to include our [Artist Statements](#) (included with the visuals in our Lent 2020 bundle) in your scripture research and reflections. Refer to our [Wilderness Theme Infographic](#) for more information about the theme. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying [Sermon Planning Grid](#).

#### About the *Wilderness* Theme:

**Wilder • ness**  
“state of the wild”

Lent begins in the wilderness. The Spirit guides Jesus into the wilderness where he comes face to face with temptation and struggle. Yet, in his forty days of fasting, resisting, and wandering, Jesus is shaped and formed for his ministry. Similarly, through the wilderness of Lent, we are invited to surrender to the wild leadings of the Spirit. We rarely enter the wilderness willingly, but hopefully through our wandering we remember who we are and whose we are. The wilderness can become sacred even if it remains dangerous. There is no wilderness space too harsh or threatening for God's love. This Lent, we welcome you to the journey.

#### Guiding Questions For Each Scripture Text:

- What is the physical or metaphorical wilderness in this text?
- What does this scripture teach us about the wilderness?
- How does the wilderness shape those who journey through it?
- Where is God in the wilderness?

# The Fifth Sunday in Lent

## KEY SCRIPTURES

**John 11:1-45** (*Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead*)

**Ezekiel 37:1-14** (*The valley of dry bones*)

## WILDERNESS COMMENTARY ON JOHN 11:1-45

We don't expect life in the wilderness. It is easy to think of the wilderness as empty, barren, dead. But the truth is: there is life in wilderness, in desert, in the arctic. In every place we dismiss as hopeless, there is life.

Just as the resurrection of Lazarus changed the perspective of those who witnessed it, this account of the miracle begins to introduce us to one of the central ideas of Christianity: death does not have the final word. Most of us have heard the story of Christ's resurrection our whole lives, and we run the risk of forgetting the miracle of it because it has become so ingrained in our lives. But this telling of the resurrection of Lazarus can bring us back to the wonder. The miracle is preceded by lengthy descriptions of Lazarus' illness and death, conversations with those in mourning, even a discussion about what will happen if you open the tomb that holds the body of a person who died four days prior. The details of Lazarus' death are clear, and so is the message: there can be life even where you least expect it.

But part of the beauty of this story is that it does not erase our mourning. Sometimes we want to skip over grief—our own or the grief of others—to get to the promise of resurrection and new life. We use the promise of life to try to erase the pains of death, but this passage shows us that we can hold both at the same time. Through the whole story, Jesus has plans to resurrect Lazarus, but still weeps when he witnesses and experiences the pain of his friend's death. This reading holds the tension that life springs forth from unexpected places, and the pain of loss is still real—a tension many of us grapple with in our lives. —Slats Toole

## THEME CONNECTIONS

- The wilderness generates life in unexpected places
- The wilderness is a place of new life—resilient life
- Grief is a wilderness
- Death is inevitable in the wilderness
- Wilderness can be a place of exile

## QUOTES & RESOURCES FOR INSPIRATION

“Being in relationship with Jesus means facing death and grief with him and learning that still, in spite of the death and the dryness and the finality of the door at the entrance to the tomb of our hopes, he can still be said to be life. Nothing is ever so dead that it keeps him from being that in himself and for us. And in John that life is not only a future hope. Abundant life is always ever now. As we approach Holy Week, having Jesus at our tombs also means that we must follow him to his. We must endure the silence of his Saturday even as we endure the silences of our own. But we endure them knowing already that Sunday will surely come, that when we are walking in the garden of our grief, we will meet him again.”

—Stamper, Meda. “Commentary on John 11:1-45.” Published on *Working Preacher*. April 10, 2011. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=904](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=904).

## The Fifth Sunday in Lent *(Continued)*

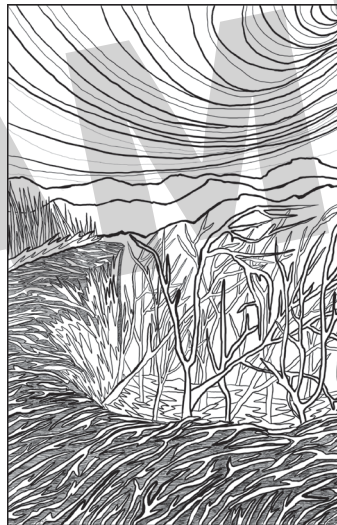
### QUOTES & RESOURCES FOR INSPIRATION

“The overarching message that the dead might live again is full of hope, not only for Israel, but for us; yet, through African American eyes, the stories are not duplicates of one another. The promise to the resurrected Israel that they would return to the ‘land of Israel’ their ‘own soil’ (vv. 12,14) is problematic for peoples of African descent in the United States who are still in ‘exile’ on many levels. One might even ask, ‘Where is home?’ for African Americans. Our ancestor African slaves were stripped from their land and separated from their families, never to be reunited again. [. . .] However, there are glimpses of revival, such as when low-income students are provided educational opportunities that are usually only afforded to wealthy students, or when a formerly incarcerated young man is given another chance to succeed in society through community support. African Americans cannot say, like Israel, ‘our hope is lost’ (v. 11) because the wind of the Spirit is still breathing in our communities; but as we live in the real tension between death and life, we must say like Ezekiel ‘Lord God, you know’ (v. 3), and God knows that when the divine spirit is put within us, we will live.”

—Powery, Luke. “Revival 1. Lectionary Commentary.” Published on *The African American Lectionary*. August 17, 2008. <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=39>.



UNBIND ME  
BY LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN  
INSPIRED BY JOHN 11:1-45



VALLEY OF DRY BONES  
BY LISLE GWYNN GARRITY  
INSPIRED BY EZEKIEL 37:1-14