

Isaiah 43: 16-21

John 12: 1-8

This morning our first Scripture reading from Isaiah declared the vision: God is about to do a new thing, can you not perceive it? Our second reading here draws us into another moment of people on the cusp of change: friends gathered in community, bearing witness to an extravagant gift when Mary pours her costly perfume on Jesus's feet. It's a strange dinner party scene, full of interpersonal tension, questions about financial stewardship, and a whole lot of bodies doing the complicated things that bodies do when they share space together. The recently-resurrected Lazarus sits across the table, Martha is serving some of the meal, smells wafting in from the kitchen, and suddenly Mary bends down, pours perfume on Jesus's feet, and wipes them with her hair. The house is filled with the scent of perfume, a sweet smell that paradoxically might remind the gathered community of death, the same scent often used to cover up the decaying smell of a body waiting to be buried. People are gathered in a room with the full complicated nature of their human bodies: bodies that sweat, cry, vibrate with laughter, bleed, and embrace one another. Our Lenten theme this week is "Alone in the Wilderness," and the stories we tell call us toward what it might look like to be *together* even when loneliness waits on the horizon or lingers in the shadows.

I got to participate in one of the Lenten home worship gatherings a few weeks back, and it was so meaningful to be in a room with a small gathered community, smelling and eating nourishing food, laughing at our very mediocre singing abilities, overhearing snippets of other conversations, and relishing in the goodness of sharing space together. No one got on the floor to wipe anyone's feet with their hair, but the joy of gathered community was felt, both in the Lenten wilderness and in the midst of many transitions and changes, both in our individual lives and in the life of this church.

The group in this story from John's gospel is on the cusp of significant change as well. And though frightening things knock at the door, and tensions arise among them, the joy of this scene is how very *not* alone this community is. They are on the brink of a dramatic wilderness moment, but here they are held in the warmth and familiarity of a dinner party among friends.

Next week we'll celebrate Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem where he will be arrested and eventually crucified. Very soon the story we will be telling about Jesus's body is one of visceral pain, exhaustion, and suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire. This week, though, as we move through the last of

the Lenten wilderness, we're invited to witness Jesus's body...not in suffering, but in a moment of pleasure and earnest connection with another person.

This story appears in some form in each of the Gospels, but only John's account identifies the woman who anoints Jesus as Mary. This is the Mary who called for Jesus to come and heal her brother Lazarus when he was sick, the Mary who knelt at Jesus's feet and cried "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This is the Mary who witnessed Jesus' own tears in that moment, and rejoiced with him when Lazarus was restored to life. This is the Mary that Jesus has been in ministry with, a colleague and a friend. And here, as Jesus approaches what will soon be his most terrifying embodied human experience, Mary meets him with love, anoints his feet with costly perfume, and wipes them dry with her own hair. It's meaningful even if this woman is a stranger, but knowing how well she knows Jesus, and how well he knows her, it's touching on a different level. In her anointing, Mary enters a moment of tender vulnerability with a friend who knows her well. The loneliness of the wilderness is broken, and we might again hear the whispers of Isaiah 43, God gently saying, "Look, I am about to do a new thing."

Still, in this tender moment I have to admit that Judas's question often troubles me. Would it have been a more ethical response to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor? If this were a choose-your-own-adventure story, many of us would think that the Christian move is to choose the route that directly benefits the poor! I wonder, though, if that is a place my own scarcity mindset, and the scarcity mindset many of us have been taught to embrace, is begging to be disrupted. God is about to do a new thing, with insight far beyond our human capacity for it, and there is goodness in multiple possibilities for how we use our resources. There is value in Mary's actions. Her embodied experience connecting with Jesus, feeling the weight of this particular moment in time...it matters.

From a utilitarian perspective, sure, selling all our most expensive assets and giving the money to those in need might be the most efficient way to do good in the world. Other stories in the Bible encourage this: In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells the rich young man that in order to be perfect, he should sell all his possessions and give all to the poor; Acts 2 invites early Christ-follower communities to sell all their possessions and distribute the proceeds to any who has need. These are radical propositions, inviting us to rethink the normative economic order in exciting ways, but holding them alongside the story of Mary and her perfume, we are called back to the purpose and value of relationships and ritual even if they are not the most economically-efficient mode of being.

In this very building, if we wanted to be as cost-effective as possible in serving the poor, we might not bother having a worship service. We wrestle with that balance as a church community on many topics: if we set aside the time and resources that we spend in one area, would we have more capacity to meet the direct needs of our neighbors? It's an ongoing balance, and yet we do gather, and we find meaning, value, and purpose in entering spaces like this to worship God and be in community with one another. Serving those in need is important to that mission of the church. But there is also value in singing on a Sunday morning, praying for the needs of our world, nurturing children through Sunday school, and sharing space around the Communion table.

A New Thing

Sunday, April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Hannah Lundberg

The kingdom of God calls us to care about big things. To care about serving the poor, righting injustices in the world, giving sacrificially to others, and so much more. And yet in the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, it's possible for multiple things to be true: Caring for the poor can have utmost value, while Jesus also can say "right now, it matters that Mary can anoint my feet as she's chosen to do. By not selling the perfume, Mary has the space to carry the weight of death, loss, and wilderness suffering that she has witnessed, and to meet Jesus there with an intimate act of care and connection.

One of the things that make a church community different from a social service organization is that we intentionally and regularly make space to honor the weight and sacred nature of all sorts of life transitions: births, deaths, marriages, losses of all kinds, and new hope in many forms. When Jesus gives Mary the space to respond to this moment in a way that feels right to her, fully present in her body, he affirms the value of ritual in the midst of the unknown...even when it is not the most economically "rational" response. Most of all, Jesus accepts and honors the way Mary has chosen to pay him respect. It's one of the many places where Jesus treats women with autonomy and legitimacy, even when other men in the room ask him to do otherwise. God is doing a new thing. And elevating the dignity of those who have been marginalized is central.

A core tenant of our faith that I always come back to is that God pours out grace, and we respond with praise and thanksgiving, not in order to earn that grace but because we can't help but respond to such an abundant and cost-free gift. Because Presbyterian theology does not tell us we have to respond in a certain way in order to earn God's love, I find a lot of hope in the expansive possibilities of how we might respond. However we connect with God is good, regardless of how others in the room might react. And don't hear me wrong: serving those in need is critical to the way we interact with the world as Christians—but God's abundant grace and perspective gives room to value many ways of responding to God—including being spiritually filled up by rituals and community spaces so that we have the strength to continue the work to be done.

Sometimes we respond in service: investing time at Hope Clinic, serving as an elder or deacon, working on care blankets, or honoring someone in a difficult spot with a dignified conversation. Sometimes we respond through advocacy for justice, recognizing the reality that poverty, racism, gun violence, and so much more are conditions created and perpetuated by our broken human systems. Sometimes we respond through worship in community: bringing our hearts and voices into a room and celebrating who God is, listening for the nudge of the Holy Spirit in the week to come. Sometimes we respond by taking a walk in nature, praying, and appreciating God's presence. Some of those things are a lot more comfortable for some of us than others, but whatever your response is, I think the hope of this passage is that God receives what you feel called to offer with

grace and love. When others come along and say “you really should have focused on this other area, that’s more pressing right now,” God is the one who says “Leave her alone. She’s doing this for a purpose.”

God is about to do a new thing. And while change can be terrifying, we rest in the hopeful knowledge that God receives our offerings with love, meets us in our messy, embodied human realities, and continues to pour out grace upon grace upon grace as we journey through the wilderness. Amen.