

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Isaiah 43.16-21; Psalm 126
Philippians 3.4b-14; St. John 12.1-8

“Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

“Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’”

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 21, 2010

It’s a question of perception. The Lord is doing a new thing. Do you perceive it? Do I? Probably not. At least according to Isaiah, even the “dumb” beasts (for instance, jackals and ostriches) perceive it before we do. We’re like the British comedy team, Mitchell and Webb, who make hilarious jokes out of biblical stories like The Sacrifice of Isaac—as though human sacrifice were God’s “best new idea.” It’s wonderfully funny humor that mocks God—until you stop and realize that it’s *we* who have made human sacrifice the centerpiece of history—that it’s *our* idea and not God’s, and that through the sacrifice of *the* Son, God means to end all human sacrifice—yet we still don’t get it. We just keep on sacrificing our children to the gods of nation, flag, democracy, Islamic honor, Christian righteousness, the economy, and “the land.” When was the last time you heard of a jackal or an ostrich sacrificing its offspring in the name of democracy, self-determination, jihad, or “health care”? How many car bombs and un-manned drones do the dumb beasts deploy in the name of peace and righteousness?

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” says the Lord, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Isaiah makes the radical argument that the Lord is free to do a new thing—and that the Lord’s new thing trumps all memory of the old glorious-violent past:

Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.

The passage abounds with Exodus memory, with Passover imagery and themes that tell an epic story: the deliverance of an enslaved people, the destruction of a

powerful oppressor, the establishment of a homeland, and the gift of new life—all by means of divine power that triumphs on behalf of the weak, trumps the enemy with loss of life and land. You can't get better narrative stuff than this: *their* terrible loss and *our* miraculous gain.

But Isaiah says God's new thing overturns that story and bids us forget it. According to Isaiah, there's a new and different story: it's the story of God using the pagan emperor Cyrus to deliver Israel from Babylon and send them back to Jerusalem in the latter part of the 6th century BCE. In that story, God's Messiah—the anointed King—would be a pagan non-believer. God would use a pagan to save the chosen people.

John's Gospel bears a similar dynamic: God will use a dead Jew to save the whole world. In testimony of God's new thing, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive burial perfume and then wipes his feet with her hair. Like Cyrus of old, Mary's gesture exceeds the boundaries of propriety. Recognizing this, Judas protests on financial/charitable grounds. Never mind that a woman violates rules of decency by touching a man not her husband—smearing his feet with exotic ointment, and then using her hair as a kind of towel. Mary had spent an enormous sum of money, that's the point—nearly a year's income—to do it. Judas, the Lord's betrayer and an embezzling treasurer, speaks for us: he protests in the name of the poor. Mary could have sold the ointment and given the proceeds to charity. She could have sent large sums to Haiti, Chile, or "Save the Children." But, instead, she blows the money on Jesus. Anyone with an ounce of sense would side with Judas. From an Administration and Finance point of view, the "worship" line is already overspent and Mary spends \$60,000 *more* on incense. *More* incense? People are going hungry in Dane County! Women and children are sleeping on the streets of Madison! Millions without adequate health care! And Mary spends more *on incense*? *What would Jesus do?*

Jesus will die defending her: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Jesus surprises us, just as he surprised Judas. Jesus isn't running for re-election; he's preparing to die on a cross. He's suffering with the homeless poor—the lost, abandoned, and forgotten.

In other words, Mary has prepared Jesus for death and burial—a signal of what's to come when Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world. Mary anoints Jesus for burial before he dies because once he's dead, there won't be time: Jesus will be crucified, then it will be Passover, then the Sabbath, then—before you can say "Messiah," Jesus will be raised from the dead—giving hope to all, and especially to the poor.

"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Does Jesus encourage us to ignore the poor? No, Jesus doesn't abandon the poor. As the crucified Messiah, he identifies with them. In Christ we are not free from our

obligation to the poor. In Christ's suffering and death he becomes one with the poor—bound to human suffering like Mary's ointment bound to his flesh.

The crucified Messiah is in, with, and under the poor even as he is in, with, and under the Eucharistic bread and wine. Hence, the ancient tradition that Christ is present in the beggar man or woman, that Christ is present in the incarcerated stranger, that Christ is present in the sick and the dying, the lonely, and the unloved.

As Christ is embalmed before he dies, so also the poor have become the essence of God beckoning us to embrace them even as Christ embraces death and burial. Since we no longer have Jesus with us in the way Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had him as friend and companion, we now have him in the fragrance of the poor. Christ begs on State Street; he lines up outside Grace Episcopal Church at sundown; he cries for food, begs for shelter, hopes for health care.

Debates over how to care for the poor are finally about more than economics, budgets, and deficits—they are about the crucified Messiah who gives his body and blood as the medicine of immortality. He is of greater worth than all else. His death provides eternal health for all things, and in him we are free to life and die in hope. Mary anoints Jesus for burial, that we might serve him among the poor of the earth and so become a fragrant offering to God. Mary anoints Jesus that we might become part of the Lord's New Thing in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.