

April 3, 2022
5th Lent, Year C
Isaiah 43: 16-21
Psalm 126
John 12: 1-8

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 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."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel today tells us that we are almost to Holy Week, which begins a week from today, that we are so close to Jerusalem we can see the city ahead.

Our first clue that we are close to Holy Week is the shift in our gospel writer. The Lectionary, the calendar of readings that we follow, has a three year cycle, Years A, B and C. But we have four gospels, so how does this get divided up?

Well, Matthew, Mark and Luke each get a full year. This year, Year C, is Luke's year. John does not get his own year, but he appears, kind of like a special guest star, in the readings in Holy Week and Easter Sunday, the season of Easter, and a few other times in the year.

So John does not get a full year, he does not have the quantity of readings

that the other three gospels get, but he gets the biggest days, quality time like, yes, a special guest star.

So our Gospel today suddenly is not from Luke, but from John, letting us know that Holy Week is just ahead.

And we find Jesus today in Bethany, a town just a few miles from Jerusalem. Jesus has been here recently, called by his dear friends, Mary and Martha, sisters. They had sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus, also a dear friend to him, was dying and they needed Jesus with them. Jesus had arrived too late to save Lazarus, and Martha and Mary were four days into deep and ravaging grief. Jesus joins their grief and cries at the grave of Lazarus, then calls Lazarus out of the grave, raising him from the dead! Word of this miracle travels quickly the few miles to Jerusalem, and the authorities react by putting a price on Jesus' head, and are looking for a time to arrest him. Holy Week is very near.

And in today's reading Jesus has returned to see his friends one more time, to share a meal with them and others he is close to, before he finally arrives at Jerusalem.

Mary takes on the job of washing Jesus' feet after he arrives, as anyone would do as an act of hospitality and welcome for a guest, after they have travelled the day and their feet are hot and dusty.

But Mary, and Martha and Lazarus, all know the danger Jesus faces now, they know that their joy in the raising of Lazarus, has heightened the tension surrounding Jesus as he looks down the road to Jerusalem.

So Mary, takes the task of washing Jesus' feet and stretches it, expands it, so that her actions are sacred and shout, but with no words, showing vividly her awareness of the holy work of Jesus. Mary washes his feet with her tears, her anticipatory grief of his death inevitable now. And then Mary takes a pound of pure nard, myrrh, echoing back to the symbolic gifts of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus, a perfume that would be used to prepare a body for burial.

Mary breaks the myrrh open and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. A pound of myrrh was a huge amount, equal to a year's wages, and an extravagant offering, much more than was needed for Mary's task, but never enough to name, to proclaim, without words, Jesus as the holy one, wonderful counselor, prince of peace.

In Mary's silent actions, the perfume, the myrrh speaks, filling the space and traveling to every corner, its fragrance, its worth, and its purpose unavoidable, unmistakable, no one able to ignore what Mary silently puts before their eyes, and noses.

No one, including Judas, can ignore the overpowering perfume or the message that Mary silently proclaims, of Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And what do we do when holiness is suddenly so vividly present with us? When we know we are standing on holy ground?

Do we have the freedom to forget ourselves and enter into the holy, or does our conscience prick, and we throw up distractions?

Judas, one of the twelve, chosen by Jesus, hastens into Mary's proclaiming silence and reprimands her for wasting the myrrh, and self-righteously speaks of the money that could have fed the poor. Our reaction is to recoil from Judas, his words harsh, his actions self-serving.

We want distance from Judas, but we know our conscience has pricked too in our days, we too have distracted from the holy, with sarcasm, with disregard for the worth of every human, with impatience with others.

We want to set up this story to ask ourselves are we Mary or are we Judas, but to do so feeds again into our human hunger for those simple dichotomies. Good and bad, us and them, in and out.

The reality is we are both, not either or. We are Mary and Judas, we follow and falter, we worship and betray, we are so wonderfully and terribly human. And as we follow and falter, our passage from Isaiah offers us our path forward. Isaiah 43 was offered to the Hebrew people in exile, a time in which they had lost everything, their lives, their homes, their families, all that was familiar, feeling desolate and faraway from God.

This description cannot help but conjure up images of folks in Ukraine today, on the run, leaving all familiar, losing everything. And many, many people in our world, far too many, have faced exile from their lives and homes. And we of homes and the privilege of familiar days, are called to help, and help again.

But if we have not known physical exile, we can understand, as we have known spiritual exile, like Judas, when we have been desolate in our mistakes, our shame, our grief, our yearning to recover and do over lost

days and words.

Ans so the prophet Isaiah speaks to all of us:

*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?*

*I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

God does not give up on us, God is always about to do a new thing, a new thing beyond our imaginations, that brings gushing rivers into our scorched deserts, and can show us a path, a way in the tangled wilderness of our minds, our souls, as we too follow and falter, as we too worship and betray. Yes, Holy Week is almost here. Jerusalem is just down the road, the days are few, we are invited to the table, all of us invited in our wonderful and terrible humanity, and the fragrance of worship and sorrow fills the house.

Amen.