

Lent 5, Year C
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It is an ongoing challenge for most people to lift their eyes from their immediate context and see the bigger picture, not only in terms of understanding the dynamics at work around them, but also in seeking to have a larger sense of vision, a more open heart, and a way of being more responsive to God. In the Old Testament reading today we hear the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people of Israel who were in exile in Babylon. Like God's people who were held captive in Egypt, God calls to this later generation to live into the story of the Exodus as their own. Every generation of Jewish people is called to understand the Exodus as a story about the history of their ancestors *and* a story that tells a fundamental truth about their own lives. Unlike their ancestors who had been slaves in Egypt, the Jewish people in Babylon were allowed to be educated, to work, and to become integrated into the surrounding culture. The danger for these Jewish people was not death from the harsh conditions of slavery or forced population control as had been under Pharaoh back in Egypt. Instead, the danger was one of being absorbed into Babylonian culture and forgetting their identity as God's people.

Israel could easily have been one in a list of ancient cultures that faded into history. But Isaiah revealed to the people of Israel that God had something to say about their situation. God declared, **"I am about to do a new thing; now it**

springs forth, do you not perceive it?” They were not at the end of their history as a people. Their best days were not behind them, as when Bruce Springsteen sang, “...well time slips away and leaves you with nothing mister but boring stories of glory days.” God was about to surprise them with a chance at new life. God invited them to be bold and courageous rather than safe and nostalgic. The question would no longer be whether they *could* ever go home again, but whether they *would*. God worked through Cyrus the Persian to conquer Babylon, and Cyrus then allowed all of the captive peoples to return to their homelands. Therein lay the question: Did they want to go back? Some of God’s people had only ever known Babylon. They had lives and homes and families there. Suddenly a door that had been closed for decades opened, and the people had a choice between an uncertain future in Israel and the lives they had built in Babylon. Faced with this unexpected option the people had to ask themselves the same question posed by the band The Clash: **“Should I stay or should I go?”**

It is not only the Israelites who have faced the choice of whether to stay in their comfort zone or step into a whole new way of life. In today’s Epistle we hear from Paul. He wrote to the church he founded in Phillipi while doing mission work. Paul encouraged the people to question their assumptions. He had been a zealous Pharisee, a devout Jewish man who followed the commandments of God as closely as possible. He had an outstanding Jewish lineage and a fine personal

history of faithful works. Paul refers to himself as having been “**confident in the flesh,**” for he had placed his trust in what was human rather than what came from God. His pride in his family heritage and his own abilities is similar to that of those who call themselves “**pure bloods**” in Harry Potter books. “**Pure bloods**” are witches and wizards who have only magical people as their ancestors. Many think of themselves as superior to those who have non-magical ancestors. Some even condescendingly call mixed background people “**mudbloods**” as a slur.

Jesus did not behave this way. Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes; he accepted non-Jews and people from rival Jewish groups; he touched lepers; and he had thoughtful conversations with women. Jesus did not present himself as better than others. After Jesus’ death Paul persecuted early Christians because he was convinced they were teaching false beliefs about God. Paul saw himself as believing and behaving rightly, calling himself “**blameless**” under the Law. But when Paul encountered the Risen Jesus he came to see that no one could be blameless except Jesus, for as God Incarnate he is the only one who could always be in right relationship with both God and other people. So Paul changed from having confidence in himself to having confidence in Jesus. He worked on his faith like an athlete in training, always trying to grow in his capacity to be more loving, trusting, and faithful in response to Jesus. Paul had a complete change in understanding and, as a result, in how he lived his life.

Finally we have the Gospel reading. In it Jesus sat at the dinner table with Lazarus, whom the reading almost casually mentions Jesus has just raised from the dead. Jesus had a close relationship with Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. The last time Jesus was in their house he calmed a frustrated Martha and affirmed Mary's right to sit at his feet as a disciple and learn from him. This time as Jesus approached their home he had a profound theological conversation with Martha and comforted a grieving Mary. The family was giving a dinner for Jesus. Martha was serving and Lazarus sat among the disciples, when Mary offered a singularly unusual gift. She took a bottle of perfume made from pure nard and anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped them with her hair. This was an extravagant gesture, as the nard cost the equivalent of one year's wages for a manual laborer. Why would she do such a thing? Jesus had just raised her brother from the dead. This could be a profound gesture of gratitude. Mary also knew that Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival of Passover. His reputation preceded him, so she may have been anointing him as King. Also, because Jesus had several confrontations with the religious authorities, his choice to raise Lazarus from the dead motivated those in power to seek Jesus' death. Mary probably knew that heading to Jerusalem at this time would be perilous. Jesus addressed the inevitability of his own death when he said, **"She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."** Likely Mary anointed him in anticipation of

his death. But why would she anoint his feet? A prophet would anoint the head of a prophet or king, so why would Mary choose his feet? These are the feet at which she sat and was counted a disciple. They are also the part of the body a servant washed, as Jesus himself makes clear when he washed the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. Mary has made an extraordinary gesture to thank, honor, and serve Jesus.

While on the surface these three readings look very different, they all address how God invites people into new life and how they respond. The Israelites faced a crisis of faith because the culture in which they lived did not understand God as they did. Would they blend in or find a new way of being faithful? Paul had been secure in his identity as an observant Jewish man, until he had a personal encounter with the Risen Jesus that made him reassess everything he thought he knew. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus became disciples of Jesus who had their whole world change when he addressed the deepest need of each of them.

What is your story? Have the people around you given up on faith? Did you think you had things figured out? Has God surprised you with an opportunity you would never have imagined? We are approaching Holy Week, the centerpiece of which is Jesus' death. Jesus was willing to die to this life so that he could make eternal life possible for all of us. The invitation to new life lies before us. How will you respond? Amen