

It has been a long, dusty, wilderness road we have been traveling, but we've arrived today at the last Sunday of Lent. The fifth of five Sundays. We began it with dust. We moved into the wilderness with the temptation of Jesus by the Devil. With a promise made to Abram, we stopped at the image of a fig tree, turned in repentance, and rejoiced with God at our prodigal return to the path.

This week, our readings focus on *time*. Specifically, the time of deliverance: Deliverance that's come and deliverance that's yet to come. Our reading from Isaiah recounts the ancient deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt through the Red Sea, then promptly tells listeners "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing..."

The Psalmist recounts the days "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion" - "mouths filled with laughter", the regard of nations and rejoicing. Then it turns to pleading: "Restore our fortunes, O Lord" - turn our weeping to joy, our seeds to sheaves.

Paul considers any gain he's made toward righteousness through the law as "loss" because of Christ - he regards it as "rubbish, in order that [he] may gain Christ." He describes where he was (fully confident in his ability to save himself), and where he is now going (fully confident now in Christ): "I press on" he writes, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."

And with Jesus in our gospel reading we take a seat at the table for a meal with a sense of just how little time remains. Dust and oil began our journey of Lent. Dust and oil now bring us to the threshold of what lies ahead. And Mary, shows us the way.

Deliverance stands at the edges of our gospel reading - not yet fully in view. To see it, we need to see the moment where we find ourselves in John. This story opens chapter 12 in John, the first verse of which throws us back on the chapter that's just finished: We read that Jesus comes to the home of "Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead."

We feel the fear of the religious authorities in the very last verse of that story (immediately before our reading for today begins). It describes the chief priests and Pharisees plotting to arrest Jesus.

The temperature is rising at this point. Seated now with a man once dead but raised to life, with the authorities gathering strength, with growing unease among the disciples, we can feel it. And now Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, anointing them and wiping them with her hair.

Let me ask you this: What's holding you back? What's keeping you from pressing on? What are you needing to let go of in order to move forward? What's holding you back from what lies ahead? Whatever Paul's words here mean to you, do you have a sense that something is "keeping you"? Because I see Mary, somehow free | of whatever's come before, and somehow unafraid | of what lies ahead. I see her peering clear-eyed into this moment (Right Now!) and seeing what needs to be done. I see her held back by nothing, seeing a need, and responding: Using her own precious gifts of oil and hair to prepare Jesus' body for whatever would lie ahead for him, she anoints him.

A few other things stand out in the story. Like Judas' response to Mary's actions, feigning compassion for the poor and disparaging her waste. And the words of Jesus (making clear to us what's already clear to Mary) that "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." What I want to lift up though is a little detail John includes: "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."

This image does a few things for me. First, it points to Mary's lavish and extravagant use of this precious oil - you can smell the richness, generosity and un-measured care of what Mary's doing. Which brings me to the second thing: Could it be her action of anointing Jesus' feet so un-sparingly | that's actually filling the house with fragrance? Is the smell of this nard simply the physical sign of this Spirit-led and Spirit-filled act?

Let's think about that for a moment. It's as though, by doing what Mary does, a scent of realizations begins circulating, breathed in by those gathered. The "veil" of worries about the future, anxiously wondering about the deliverance God once gave, shrouding this precious, fleeting time with Jesus - it lifts and falls away in the scent of Mary's oil. There is a real power in what she does. Jesus obviously thinks so too, for the very next chapter we find him imitating her at his final meal, washing the feet of all his disciples. This loving, hold-nothing-back care that Mary shows Jesus, he makes his final act of preparing the disciples for his absence.

We'll hear the story of that meal a week from this Thursday at the first service of the great "Three Days of Holy Week." Maundy Thursday centers around the institution of the Lord's Supper and Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. For now though, in this act of Mary toward Jesus, what exactly is she doing? Perhaps without knowing it, she is preparing Jesus' body for burial - for this was the custom, to anoint the dead with precious oils and spices. To Mary, it could have simply been caring. But to us, her's is an act of devotional love that blesses the road he has traveled, and prepares him for where that road takes him next.

I've told this story before but it bears repeating I think.

Frank was 97 years old. I had gone over to his apartment to play some hymns for him in the weeks before he took to bed. But now, this place he shared with his wife of 3 years, was full with a circulating crowd of family and friends, visiting and sharing food around the bed that now sat in their living room. Hospice had moved in and was watching in vigil with the rest of us. Frank was actively dying now, but his family took turns sitting with him to say goodbye. Frank's breathing eventually changed and the family all gathered together around him as the community closed in around them - the family holding Frank, the community holding his family - and Frank gave his last breath.

After a few minutes passed, Pastor Paul gathered the attention of the group and said, "We enter now into a time of ritual blessing of our beloved brother Frank. It's an ancient traditional practice of washing the dead. With the love and respect we held for Frank in life, we wash him now in death, sending him to the one who holds all things and gathers Frank home.

The 30 or so people present began singing hymns as his wife Marylou sat on the bed, lovingly dabbing his face and chest with a washcloth. Pastor Paul took Frank's leg and Frank's 10 year old grandson washed his feet. Others washed his arms, his back, his neck and hands. Bathed in song, we washed Frank in loving care and the water that first gave him birth. What were we doing with Frank but blessing the road he had traveled and preparing him for where that road wout lead him next.

Deliverance is an experience some know better than others, but it's an experience remembered and cherished by individuals and communities alike. What we prepare for now as Holy Week approaches is the telling of the old story of our deliverance through God's action in and through Jesus. It's a story that sits at the heart of what we do together as church all year round. What I hope to do on Maundy Thursday is honor the road that we've walked together and prepare you for where the road takes us next.

We need that preparation, we need the lavish and particular care that Mary gave Jesus, that Jesus gave to his disciples. For that preparation helps us bear our losses, even the loss of Jesus, as it reflects the hold-nothing-back kind of hope we have in the promise that God walks with us always. It's this kind of hope that helps us feel, touch, taste and even smell (with newly awakened senses) the newness of God's coming deliverance for which we wait and long - the deliverance that breaks forth as we've never known it before.

AMEN