“Costly and Extravagant”

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Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8

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***Isaiah 43:16-21***

***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:  
18Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.  
19I 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.  
20The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness,  
    rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,  
21    the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.***

***John 12:1-8***

***Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. 3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(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.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”***

In our Tuesday Bible Study, we are reading the gospel of Luke out loud. It goes much slower that way, and there are several versions of the Bible being used among those that attend. Luke has 24 parables, more than twice the number of parables as any other gospel. Parables are so short that reading one and discussing it before moving on to the next one seems to take a little while. Rather than feeling tedious however, we have been finding ourselves pretty engaged in discussion so that going slow feels like the right thing to do. One part of the discussion that comes to mind now is a discussion about trusting that God has given us what we need in order to make decisions and in trusting that, we can trust ourselves.

When the Israelites first went into the wilderness, God gave them what they needed by sending manna. Last week we read from the prophet Joshua that the day the Israelites were able to eat produce from the land at their Passover, the manna stopped. God gave them what they needed to be able to live in the land that was not home, and to thrive. Today we read from Isaiah, that God will continue to provide what God’s people need. In the Old Testament, water was often the symbols of life. Often the sea, wild and tempestuous and raging, refers to the barriers to life. And rivers often are used to refer to things that bring life, that carry life from one place to another, much like the boats and ships that bring goods from one city to another. Our text from Isaiah uses this imagery, telling us that God makes a way in the sea; makes a path in the mighty waters. God uses God’s power to extinguish the horse and chariot and soldiers who chased the Israelites to the Red Sea and were drowned as the waters closed after the Israelites were across. Arriving in the wilderness, God reminds them not to worry – don’t even remember the former things or those things from the old days. Here in the wilderness, God is going to do a new thing. A thing the Israelites cannot even imagine. That desert, that wilderness, will bring them life as God makes a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The water will be for their thirst and for their crops. God removed the barrier to life – the sea parted; God gave them life – made rivers even in the desert. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" Continue to trust God. The Israelites were forced out of Egypt, and fell into slavery They were freed from slavery, only to land in the wilderness. Slavery, empire, wilderness – these were not going to stop God from providing a way, from doing a new thing.

Diana Butler Bass, a theologian, writes a blog called Sunday Musings. This week, she quoted the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who said, “In the wilderness, where there is no empire or economy to sustain, we become beings in our own right, not troops or a work force, man-in-the-mass. We are no longer a number but a person in the image of God.” (quoted from Diana Butler Bass, Sunday Musings for 4/6/25)

In the wilderness, in times of darkness and struggle, during Lent, we are stripped of everything we have known – which should sound horrible. And yet, without anything between ourselves and God, Rabbi Sacks says, “We are no longer a number but a person in the image of God.”

Maybe this explains why even good things can be terrifying. Maybe this explains why we sometimes are a little leery of that new thing that God is doing. The devil you know vs. the devil you don’t know. We risk suffering from a learned helplessness when we would rather stay in the cage with the door open, than risk going outside the cage at all. When we are completely stripped, we are no longer a number but a person in the image of God. I don’t know if I’m ready to be that bare. Can’t I keep at least a few of my reliable bad habits to get me through the hard times?

As we approach the end of Lent with Palm Sunday and holy week coming up, we are being reminded by the Old testament texts that God’s people have always been able to count on God, and that God will always be with us when things turn dark. Even our lectionary texts have switched this week from the verbose Luke to the gospel of John. John’s gospel is a lot less chatty than Luke, and the narrative moves quickly.

The text from John comes soon after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This was the act that brought the Romans to the point of actively looking to arrest and kill Jesus. As they plotted, the festival in Jerusalem was approaching so they hoped to capture Jesus in Jerusalem. It was six days before the festival that Jesus returned to the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the scene for today, Martha is once again cooking, cleaning, making sure things are just so, the recently risen Lazarus is reclining at the table, along with Jesus and some disciples.

This text may sound familiar. This scene appears in slightly other forms in the other gospels. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is at the home of Simon the Leper where some of those present objected to the extravagance of the expensive perfume; in Luke Jesus is at the home of Simon the Pharisee where some of the Pharisees objected to the same.. In Luke, Mary first anoints Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her long hair.

We’ve spoken before about how each gospel writer brings their own perspective on many of the same stories and topics, and thereby present their own theology to bear. The gospel of John is one that is full of extravagant numbers – at Cana 180 gallons of new wine are created. Five thousand hungry are fed by the Sea of Galilee. Simon Peter told to set out his nets once again even after fishing all night, 153 large fish begin jumping into the net. It’s no wonder this alabaster jar is said to cost almost one year’s wages. The gospel of John is about abundance. The abundance of God’s mercy, generosity, giving, love.

The gospel of John is also one that uses foreshadowing a great deal. It’s a theological statement that this text where someone is anointing Jesus’ feet in the same manner as one would have been anointed after death as the body is prepared for burial is happening just before Palm Sunday. It’s no accident that in the gospel of John, Judas is the one objecting to the extravagance of Mary’s actions. Judas is always looking out for Judas, and continually takes money from the common purse, so he’s not really concerned with the poor who could be helped by selling the expensive perfume. He just says this because he thinks Jesus will agree with him. This is the same Judas who will betray Jesus to the authorities on the night he is arrested. Mary is preparing Jesus for burial, almost as if she knows that something big is going to happen soon.

Contrast the gospel of John with the slow reading of all of the drama in the gospel of Luke, and we can feel the temperature rising on our Lenten season. Just two lines later, after the text for today, and what we call Palm Sunday has begun, in this gospel narrative. In the next two weeks before Easter, we will experience the joy and triumph of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, followed by a crazy time in Jerusalem where Jesus is arrested, tortured, killed and buried. Our Palm Sunday narrative will return us to Luke, and our Easter narrative will come from the gospel of John. I hope as we live these last days of Lent, we can find ourselves somewhere inside the story – not quite in the wilderness, trusting God to provide what we need to approach the Easter story with a renewed sense of what it means to rely on God through the triumphal entry, through the final darkness of Lent, knowing that Easter is coming!

Let’s pray,

2 <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-03-31/john-121-8-4/>

Harmon, Chelsey, March 2025

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-04-01/john-121-8-2/>

Hoezee, Scott, 2019

Kirshner, Shannon J., Sermon, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

<https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2022/040322.html>