

Sermon: Preparing for a New Thing

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8**

What we know about God wouldn't fill a thimble, but we know one thing for sure: God doesn't need our cash. There is nothing sold by Amazon that God needs, and any gifts sent to 'Heaven' would come back with no known forwarding address. Instead, God wants us to know that we ought to give as God gives. God wants us to understand that God is the one who makes things happen.

In the Isaiah reading, God says to forget the former things, right after reminding us who it was that made a way in the sea and 'extinguished' Pharaoh's army like a wick. So, God brings up the Exodus, remembered every year in Passover celebrations around the world. And then God said, forget about it. Why?

The point, perhaps, is that even though God did something once, God is about to do a new thing *now*.

For Isaiah and his audience, living in the wider context of the Exile, the big question for them was, where was God that this disaster was allowed to happen? What about God's promise to always be with them? Did God break that promise? How do we trust in anything after that, if that was true? Conveniently, they forgot that they had also broken their covenant with God. But now, times have changed. In this reading, they are on the eve of the Return, a completely unexpected but long hoped-for *new thing*.

Though the setting in the Gospel passage is entirely different, Jesus teaches a new thing. Here, we find him at table with Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and the other disciples. On the surface, it seems like a quiet, peaceful dinner. Only Judas has anything to say, aside from Jesus, for whom everything is a teachable moment.

But it's not a perfect evening. John tells us that Jesus had recently raised Lazarus from the dead, but that's not quite accurate. Jesus *resuscitated* Lazarus, who was only *mostly* dead. Because of this, Caiaphas and the chief priests planned to put Jesus to death. Only two verses from now, it becomes clear that they plan to kill Lazarus too.

In ancient Greco-Roman moralist terms, Judas is a *vicious* man, a word meaning he's a liar, corrupt, reprehensible, and generally *rotten*. Cicero, the Roman philosopher, politician, and lawyer who lived about 100 years before Jesus, once said that a *hypocrite* makes it his business to appear virtuous at the moment when he is most false, and that hypocrisy is incompatible with friendship. That's Judas.

If truth is revealed by one's words and actions, then there is no truth in Judas. Jesus, on the other hand, speaks the truth and *is* the Truth. Judas is 180 degrees away from Jesus. It is a rule of thumb that only one who is your exact opposite can betray you. Every single time he is mentioned in the Gospel, John adds that Judas is the one who betrays Jesus. And if he'd betray Jesus, he'd betray anyone, so he has no problem stealing from the common purse and, by thus, from the poor. And he's out 300 denarii.

Judas is as lost as lost can be.

Jesus said, 'You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' Over the years, the church has used these words at various times to justify either doing *something* or *nothing* to address the needs of the poor. But what if we read these words as if Jesus is speaking directly to and only to Judas? When Judas complained about the cost of the perfume, Jesus said to him, 'Leave her alone.' Nothing indicates that Jesus is talking to anyone else when he says, 'You always have the poor with you.' It's kind of a loaded line. Because Judas steals from the poor, thoughts of them might always weigh on his conscience, and in that sense, the poor will always be with him. And as a betrayer, he will not always have Jesus.

Judas is as *poor* as poor can be.

The American writer and sometime farmer E.B. White wrote, 'One of the most time-consuming things is to have an enemy. The fox is mine,' he said. 'He wants to destroy my form of society—a society of free geese.' Before White realized what a waste of time it was to make the fox his enemy, he worked to improve his weapons and perfect his aim. Then it occurred to him that nations do the same. He said that he realized 'what a vast amount of time this world would have for useful and sensible tasks if each country could take its mind off "the enemy."'

Isaiah's people lived in a time of exile, a time when their world and their society was turned upside-down by an enemy. We understand exile in a different way today.

Exile can come with the sudden death of a friend or relative, or from a bad decision that causes financial stress. Broken relationships can leave us feeling lost and abandoned. How do we take our mind off enemies like those? How do we turn back to ‘useful and sensible tasks?’

We’re inclined to hold onto past traumas – not always willingly – and a natural response would be to distrust new promises.

Lent is a time when we hear Jesus’ promise of divine forgiveness, the promise of new life, and the promise of God’s love. In light of all of our past exiles, of those times when we thought we were all alone, do we go along with it again this time?

According to Isaiah, God says, ‘Yes, you do! Watch this!’

Jesus’ final days began with a supper among loving friends. Lazarus, as usual, said nothing. Martha served. Martha stands out in John’s Gospel for her faith and trust in Jesus and his abilities. We think of her as a model for how to provide radical hospitality. But Mary – Mary is special.

Mary is the disciple who is always at Jesus’ feet, listening, learning. Her faith is not as assured as Martha’s, but in her discipleship, it grows. Hers is a developing faith. And today, in an act of love and devotion, she shows the depth of her understanding.

People say Mary is the one true disciple. She loves Jesus in a very fundamental way. By anointing Jesus’ feet with this wildly expensive perfume, Mary actually performs a prophetic act. Many people assume she was preparing Jesus’ body for burial, except she’s six days early, so this might just be foreshadowing, but if she were, she would not have wiped the nard off his feet. Her actions show that she believes Jesus to be the Resurrection and the Life. No grave can hold Jesus. Wiping the perfume off his feet symbolizes this. And now the perfume is in her hair; she can’t escape the fragrance. It fills the house and it follows her everywhere.

That night, Mary offered all that she had in the form of an extraordinary gift.

And like Mary’s perfume, extraordinary *abundance* follows wherever Jesus goes: at the wedding in Cana; by the Sea of Galilee where he fed 5,000 people; and by filling the disciple’s nets to the breaking point after a night of bad fishing.

Now, God is about to make a way where there is no way. In fact, God sounds very confident about it.

In Isaiah, thus says the Lord, ‘I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness.’ As we walk the road to Jerusalem, toward the Cross and into the gathering darkness at noon, we remember God’s promise for a new future. As we move closer to Holy Week and Easter, God promises not only to raise up Jesus, but to bring *us* to new life too. God’s new thing is about to happen *in us*. The way in the wilderness leads to *our hearts*.

To borrow E.B. White’s phrase again, what kind of useful, sensible thing can we offer God? Our lives are the most extravagant and valuable gifts we have. What if we each offered our very lives in service to God and neighbor? Would that be enough?

John draws our attention to three people: Mary, Judas, and Jesus. We make the judgment that Mary is accepted and affirmed while Judas is rejected and lost. But is this Jesus’ judgment? If Jesus came to save the lost, then who is more lost than Judas? If the Good Shepherd will go to any length to save a lost sheep, is Judas beyond his saving grasp? Is there a limit to Jesus’ reach? Are there those Jesus cannot love and save? Can we be so closed-off and stubborn that Jesus can’t find a way to us, lost in our wilderness?

A pastor named William Carter wrote that, ‘Long before a gift can be wasted, it must first be received.’¹ That means to me, that no matter how we end up, we all start out as potential disciples, equally invited to follow Jesus.

In this reading from John’s Gospel, we are challenged to consider how the grace of God includes both the devoted disciple and the poor-in-spirit betrayer, and everyone in between. Jesus is the gift of God, sent into a world that did not ask for him. In Lent, we are encouraged to accept this costly gift, to open our hearts, and to stand as witnesses to the new thing prepared by God: love without limits.

Amen.

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 144.