

Sermon April 6, 2025

Isaiah 43:16-21

The Lord gives water in the wilderness

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down; they cannot rise; they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

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.

The 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, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

Mary Anoints Jesus

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.'

The Gospel of Christ...

Julian and Mary

"I am about to do a new thing", God tells us in Isaiah, "Can you recognize it as it comes towards you?"

In a time of fear and anxiety, Isaiah comes to the people and tells them: "Don't worry. God has a plan. Our God who created the world is promising a time of new creation -- water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, drink for God's chosen people. A promise to restore our souls

It's a promise for the ages. In times of fear and anxiety... when God seems so very far away, God promises to make everything fresh and new... just for us.

And these promises rang out again as Jesus's journey came even closer to the cross. Even in these days of denial and betrayal, still there were signs of God's new creation breaking forth. And the clearest sign of a new day happens at the home of Jesus' beloved friends. How many times had he visited with them, sitting with his disciples in Lazarus' living room, talking about God's new reign. Mary sitting at his feet, listening. Martha bustling in the kitchen, making wonderful meals for them all to share. And now they have even more to celebrate. Lazarus had been dead and buried for 4 days, until Jesus came back and literally raised him from the dead. It was unbelievable... but it happened right before their eyes as Lazarus walked out of his tomb, still wrapped in his grave clothes. Martha goes into the kitchen to prepare her best meal yet because tomorrow Jesus will leave for Jerusalem. Even as they celebrate, they all know that chances are Jesus will never return to this place.

So, Mary wants to do something special to thank Jesus. While Martha prepares the special meal alone, Mary goes out and buys a bottle of perfumed oil. Special oil that costs as much money as most people earn in a year. It's an extravagant gift, more than she can afford.

As she opens the bottle, the fragrance takes away the stench of Lazarus' partially decayed body. She uses the oil to anoint Jesus' feet, rubbing the oil into his tired feet, massaging away the pain. When she is done, she takes her hair and gently uses it to wipe away the oil. It is an act of extravagant, abundant love.

But it's also shocking... and completely unexpected. Everyone stares in horror, but Mary doesn't care. She wants to thank Jesus for the gift of her brother's life. She wants to honor him as one who has changed her life forever. And, Mary wants to say goodbye... she knows that there's a good chance that

Jesus will not survive his visit to Jerusalem. She anoints him, not as a King, but as one who is prepared for burial.

"I am about to do a new thing", God tells us. Mary's overflowing love for Jesus prepares the way for things to begin anew.

Thirteen hundred years later, Julian of Norwich encountered Jesus in a new way. She had a series of visions that restored her soul in times of plague and revolt. Her visions refer to a single set of experiences spread over two days when she was seriously ill. She then spent the rest of her life pondering, meditating, interpreting what had happened to her. The two versions of her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, written decades apart, show her struggling to find the words to explain this profound mystical experience that changes her relationship with God forever.

In her vision, the famous quote *All things shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well* is not Julian's blithe assertion against all the evidence seen in a troubled world. This is a statement Christ presents to her as fact. "How?" she asks! It took Julian 40 years of solitary prayer to learn to live a life of discipline of spiritual trust.

Many of Julian's visions state that, whatever we suffer... whatever the evidence seems to tell us, we are *safe* in God... we are with God.

Mary understood this too. She gives what she has extravagantly. But no one understands and they focus on the wasted money and resources. All that money spent on a handful of oil that is gone in just a few moments. All that is left is the lingering scent in the air. Judas puts their shock into words: "We should have used this money for the poor! Think about all of the good things we could have done!"

"Leave her alone. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

What would happen if we showed the kind of devotion that Mary and Julian showed Jesus? In different ways, both women devoted their lives to Christ. Julian gave her all to a life of prayer and solitude. Mary gave her all to anoint and bless the One who saved her brother and gave her a glimpse of new life.

When Jesus tells us that we will always have the poor with us, he is reminding us of our fundamental mission in the world: to live our love everywhere. To have faith that all will really be well. If we inspired by these two women of faith, our hearts will be moved to care for the poor and all those whom Jesus calls us to serve.

Judas follows Jesus because Jesus serves his own greedy needs. Judas is interested in the poor because he got something out of it. And ultimately, his greed would bring him down, pulling Jesus down with him.

But, Mary shows us a different path. She follows Jesus because she loves him and is devoted to him. That's it – she is asking nothing for herself and expects no recognition for her gift. She simply gave him what he needed, giving all she had, even her beautiful hair, to serve Jesus. In this way she shows us not only how to be a disciple of Jesus, but how to live — As Isaiah told us, God made us so that we might declare God's praise. And Julian modeled how to take these ancient truths and live lives of true faith.

"I will always be with you until the end of time," Jesus will tell his disciples. And he is with us, in the poor who are also with us. Every time we offer love to others, we offer love to Jesus. It is as simple as that.

When we give food to the hungry, we give food to Jesus; when we give clothes to the naked, we give clothes to Jesus; when we welcome a stranger or care for the sick, we welcome and care for Jesus... whenever we reach out a loving hand to "the least of these," we find ourselves holding tight to Jesus.

God promised a new thing, and we discover it in Jesus. At his table all will be fed with the food that sustains us forever. He comes into the desert of our lives and refreshes us in the waters of baptism. We are no longer oppressed by the stench of sin and death but live in the sweet-scented garden of new life. He comes and offers us the gift of new creation. Let us claim him as Mary did and serve him like Julian did... with all we have. Amen.