



Facing Death

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

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The exciting part about the spring season is the promise of new life. Leaves grow back on trees and annual plant stems break through the ground. When I can, I spend time in my backyard trimming bushes, watering plants, planting new ones, and taking out weeds. I find yard work satisfying and relaxing even as I feel it in my sore back. There is plenty of good exercise which benefits not only the body but also the mind. Contact with nature has that effect on the mind; it helps to relax and soften; it prepares one for emotional and spiritual work ahead.

Nature can also be unforgiving. I lost a few plants after the last freezing spell because I didn't cover all of them. I didn't prepare with enough plant covers. I also do not water my potted plants regularly, only to get to some of them when their leaves are droopy and beg for water. Then I make the mistake of watering them too much, and they drown a few days later. A very pity scene to behold. How I wish the plant could speak back to me and say, "Don't worry, I forgive you."

In the reading from Isaiah 43, we hear God saying something like, "Don't look back. Don't worry about the past." That's a consoling statement to hear. I've repeated that to myself and others often in search of consolation and assurance. There is hope in God's words inviting us to consider the new things awaiting us in the future. That hope calms the spirits; it opens our lungs to draw in new and inspiring breaths. It invites us to blink our eyes clean of tears and clear our mind of accusing thoughts. It creates new expectations and a willingness and a readiness to discover new possibilities.

When taken out of context, those words may truly have that cleansing effect and set one on a new course. But God's words in Isaiah are not about forgiving past sins. They are about exalting the great intervention of Yahweh in the life of a people enslaved in Egypt and then more.

Liberation from slavery is central to the story of Israel. It is identity forming in at least a couple of ways: It says that no one can enslave and own people and treat them cruelly for cheap labor for all people are created in the image of God. And it says that God has chosen and elected them for a special relationship with God and for an important mission in the world: becoming light (and example) for all nations.

However important the mighty acts of God that gave freedom to Israel, God is saying now "I will do even greater things. Just watch." It's not about going back! God calls us forward. We become part, together with nature (wild beasts, rivers, and deserts), of this new path Yahweh is opening in front of us. How can we not see it?

The fact is, when we get too comfortable with the story, when we take it for granted, when we become accustomed to the changes God made in our life in the past, we tend to take possession

of them and claim ownership. We forget that it was God that brought us to that point in the first place, and we boast instead that it was our choices, our strength, and our smarts that benefited us. We are quick to say, “We have what we have – a successful ministry, a beautiful sanctuary, or respect in the community - because we worked at it.” But let’s be clear about where glory is due: whatever we have achieved is only thanks to God.

When invited to make changes in our life together and in the way we do things, some are quick to point out that “We have always done it that way, so why change now?” not realizing that back when our ancestors first started a new ministry, a new ritual, or a new way of praying, they did it with God’s help and God’s direction to respond to a current need. The scope was to respond to a new way of life or to an emerging need for the purpose of giving honor to God.

Our old way of doing things was new back then. When necessary, our old ways need to be renewed or scrapped altogether. Whenever there is a change, we are bound to feel anxious and uncomfortable. Even when things were done for the first time centuries ago, you bet somebody protested, “I don’t like it. We’ve never done it this way before.” Let us remember: We aren’t here for ourselves, but for God.

We are constantly called to respond to God in the present moment, drawing guidance from the past, including the guidance to be flexible and learn a new way and opportunity that opens before us. Old things are God’s things before we take possession of them. Historical ways of doing things still belong to the God of history, the God present in our story before we attach our identity to them and can’t let go without spinning into an emotional crisis.

In today’s gospel story, we have an example of responding to a present situation with generosity and flexibility. Jesus arrives in Bethany – hard to do nowadays with the massive wall separating Israelis and Palestinians! – at “the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.” He and his disciples gather there to celebrate friendship and to tell stories of life. Just about the same time, the Sanhedrin has gathered to plot Jesus’ and Lazarus’ death (John 11:45-53 and 12:9-11).

During the meal, Martha serves, just as she always does (John 10:38-42), and Lazarus, alive and well, sits at the table. Mary also does what she has done in the past: she sits at Jesus’ feet as reported in the gospel of Luke (10:38-42). Unconcerned with expense or social etiquette, she breaks a flask of expensive ointment and with that, and not with water, performs the action of a servant by washing Jesus’ feet. She even unbinds her hair, which is normally done only in the presence of one’s husband and dries his feet in an action of extreme intimacy.

Mary exemplifies what it means to be a disciple, even though what she does may seem insignificant, even wasteful. She demonstrates her devotion to Jesus not through her words but through her simple actions, putting faith into motion. Anointing, the act of applying oil or other ointment, was a common ritual practice at this time. This ritual was used especially after death to prepare a body for burial.

But why the extravagant abundance? It looks like such a waste. Does she really need to use all that ointment on Jesus’ feet? Could it not be sold for a full year salary? Could she not keep some of it for the original intention of smearing a corpse with it, perhaps that of her sister, Martha, or her brother, Lazarus? Judas struggles with it: he can’t wrap his head around it. Mary chooses abundance in a world of violence and scarcity. Judas can’t understand her choice. Often, we struggle with that, too. How much is too much? Give away what your heart says to give away and it will be blessed by God? Give cheerfully without counting the cost. God will provide.

Is Mary's gift lavish? Yes. Is it "useless" in the practical-minded economy Judas brings to the table? Yes. Is it logical? No. And yet Jesus cherishes and blesses it. Mary, on her part, doesn't wait for Jesus to perish to gift him of that demonstration of affection and devotion. She needs to act now, for, as Jesus explains, we, unfortunately, will have plenty of chances to care for the poor. So, honor him -she thinks and suggests- while he is present.

When Mary anoints Jesus she anticipates his looming death, something his disciples have not yet caught onto. Mary, in the presence of all, is the one who prepares Jesus for his final days on earth. She reveals profound insight, and, through her gesture of loving faith, she reminds those present who it is that they have in their midst. She also knows his days are numbered and her time with her friend is limited. She does not despair but by her action she demonstrates gratitude. She is the only one who practically thanks Jesus for the great gift of life his death means for all of us.

What happens between Jesus and Mary in this narrative happens skin to skin. Mary doesn't need to use words; her yearning, her worship, her gratitude, and her love are enacted wholly through her body. Just as Jesus later breaks bread with his disciples, Mary breaks open the jar in her hands, allowing its contents to pour freely over Jesus's feet. Just as Jesus later washes his disciples' feet to demonstrate what radical love looks like, Mary expresses her love with her hands and her hair. Just as Jesus later offers up his broken body for the healing of all, Mary offers up a costly breaking in order to demonstrate her love for her Lord.

Mary anoints Jesus and is not concerned with how the whole scene is going to be interpreted or what people may think of her. She fully trusts that she and what she does matter to Jesus. She is totally confident and grounded in her love for Jesus. Rather than shunning Mary's intimate gesture, Jesus on his side receives her gift into his own body with gratitude, tenderness, and blessing. She prepares him for something for which she herself is not yet prepared. Mary anoints Jesus in the midst of a world that will kill him. The very next day, Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem while those who eventually betray him cheer.

John tells us that the sweet-smelling scent of the ointment fills the house. It's not lost on the diners that not too long ago the stench of death infested the air when Lazarus, once dead, was given life back and called forth out of the tomb. Jesus' presence and his preparation to death removes the curse of death and reverses the course of history. A new path is opened before us.

Mary's act of deep faith and devotion, seemingly insignificant and wasteful, is an act of firm and fervent hope, an act of extravagant love that God can bless into something life giving, something redemptive and healing, even if we don't always understand how or why.

Let us learn from her. Let us follow her lead. Let us give extravagantly. Let us honor our Lord who didn't count the cost and lovingly gave his life for us. Amen.