



“Thus says the Lord” – sit up and take notice, people! God is speaking- not me or you but God. When God speaks we need to “stop, look and listen” before crossing the street. When God speaks, our life is about the change. When God speaks, we learn who we trust: do we stop to discern what God is telling us or do we continue on our way certain that God couldn’t have meant me? And, the news from God is not always good, so sometimes we don’t want to listen because we might have to change something about our lives that, quite frankly, we like just fine, thank you.

The news today from God is good although perhaps not as concrete as we would like. God is doing a new thing. In each reading, we learn about new life – new ways of being together, trusting that God is life in situations where we see only death. We are not to be stuck in the past. Put “the good old days” where they belong in the memory box.

And, even though we are not to remain mired in the past, we grow out of the past. The past is part of who we are today. But the past does not need to – and should not- define us and our possibilities.

Paul Nancarrow reminds us that “the new thing cannot be understood for what it is *apart from* the Exodus: it is the same God who works liberation for the people in each instance, and the depth and breadth and importance of this new liberation cannot be grasped without reference to the old. The warning not to remember former things cannot be taken as an absolute: it is only *by* remembering the Exodus that the Return can make sense. Instead, the warning is not to be *limited* by considering the things of old, not to assume that since God has acted to liberate in one way before, that is the only way that God can act. God is free to act in the world in ways the world has never before known; but even those new ways will be in continuity with God's own fundamental character of justice, peace, and love.”

God helps us move on from the past. God is making a new way.

In the passage from Isaiah, we read that “instead of making a way *through* water, God will now make a way where there is *no* water, and will in fact there *provide* water for those who journey on the way.” Our eyes see only the desert with no water- with no life. God tells us that there is water and there is life. God brings life to what we think brings death. With God nothing is impossible.

Paul wants to "gain Christ and be found in him." Paul begins by giving his credentials so that those at the church in Philippi know he speaks with authority. Nancarrow writes that Paul does this so that he has credibility when Paul pleads with the church to understand that "Christ is not a possession he can gain and claim, but an *environment*, a surrounding and supporting reality that claims Paul and redirects Paul's personal activities to divine ends. This is what it means to Paul to "share Christ's sufferings" and "become like him," even to the point of death: that Paul's life-aims are coordinated to the larger ideals and goals of God's righteousness made manifest in human terms and available to human realization in Jesus. It is because "Christ Jesus has made me his own" in this way that Paul revalues his former accomplishments and is willing to set them aside, to forget them, and instead to press on toward the actualization of new potentials in Christ-like life." As we heard last Wednesday evening, Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" many, many times in his writings to refer to the church- a group gathered to love and serve the Lord. A reminder that when we live a Christ-like life, we are showing the "new way" that the prophet Isaiah told us about.

Paul turns aside from a life of some status- a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews, trained in the law – and one who was sent by the religious authorities to track down members of the new troublesome sect. And then Paul experiences on the Damascus Road God doing a new thing. A way being made out of no way. A place where there appears to be no life and yet God makes life. Paul's life is completely turned around and he has been set on a new way. Paul did not know that he would have the Damascus Road experience. In fact, if he had known what was coming, he might have chosen to travel a different road. The unexpected takes us by surprise- and not always a good surprise. More often than not God calls upon us to stretch our boundaries. God calls us to live beyond our comfort zone for it is in the growing edges that we have a chance to know God more fully and to live into our life with God more fully.

When we remain focused on the past, we cannot move forward into the future that God has for us. Thus we get those famous words from Paul: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." And yet, what lies behind gives some credibility to Paul. Forgetting what lies behind though, in the sense that those things Paul valued and which gave him status- yes, those are the things that are set behind. Now Paul can focus on where God has done a new thing. Paul can step out in faith so that the life God hopes for Paul can become a reality.

"Paul the Christian is hardly imaginable without Paul the Jew. For him, to 'forget what lies behind' is not to erase it utterly, but to refuse to be limited to simply reenacting old ideals, and instead to release influences from his past to be the raw materials for new realizations of new ideals, pressing on to a new 'call of God in Christ Jesus.' The passage invites us to ask what things in our lives might need such "forgetting," such release to become the energies of new responsiveness to God's call.¹

The Gospel passage is another example of God making a new way where we might think there is no water in the desert because **we know** how this story ends on Good Friday. Those present at

¹ Much of this sermon is from Paul Nancarrow and can be found at <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearc/2013-03-17/fifth-sunday-lent> (March 16, 2013)

that dinner at the home of Lazarus who had been raised from the dead, did not know – or did not know for certain- that there would be a new way beyond Good Friday.

Today's passage of the anointing of the feet of Jesus in the Gospel of John is quite different from the other gospels. First, in John we read that this event took place at the home of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. It is Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who anoints Jesus, not Mary Magdalene or Mary the prostitute or the woman possessed of demons. Rather, the Mary that Jesus had praised for sitting at his feet to learn from Jesus. A treasured member of his disciples was now anointing Jesus in preparation for his death.

In most accounts of an anointing, it is done by a man for a man. The prophet Samuel of the king Saul. The Pope of Charlemagne. That's how society was structured – very patriarchal. Here, though, we have a woman anointing a man.

Anointing was on the heard with oil. In Psalm 133 we read:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Today, we anoint the head with oil that has been blessed by a Bishop, at time of Baptism, Confirmation, sickness or death. We also anoint with oil the hands of healers. We impose ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesdays as a reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Anointing represents a setting apart and a sealing. It signifies a relationship with God.

Perhaps Mary understood this as she took that costly perfume and anointed the feet of Jesus. Perhaps Mary understood on some level that the feet of Jesus were the true symbol of his ministry rather than the traditional anointing of the head for a king. Jesus, after all, was an itinerant preacher- not someone sitting on a throne with power and might and guards and palaces. Jesus walked- and walked- and walked- to reach the people with his message of love and grace and forgiveness. Forgetting what lies behind and striving forward to love one another as God has loved us.

Nancarrow posits that the anointing by Mary of Jesus is in a way “a test of Jesus' New Commandment -- "Love one another as I have loved you"- because Mary shows for Jesus the same quality of tender love he had shown for her and Martha when they grieved over Lazarus; she loves as he loves; and this will be the ground of her ability to love others, including the poor, when Jesus is no longer with her in earthly life.”

This scene of a dinner with foot washing prefigures Maundy Thursday. It is on Maundy Thursday that Jesus commands those present to remember him whenever they eat bread and drink wine. It is Maundy Thursday when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples reminding them – and us- that we are servants. Not lords and masters of God's realm, but servants sent forth to love one another as God has loved us.

Each of us is found in one or more of those who play a part in today's readings.

Are we the one who can help others see a way where there is no way – where there is water in what appears to be a desert?

Are we someone who lives a Christ-like life, forgetting what lies behind and striving towards the goal of unity with God?

Are we a Mary who gives extravagantly taking something previously set aside for one purpose but using it now because it is appropriate to do so?

Are we a Judas who counts every penny and begrudges the use of funds that don't benefit us?

Each of us is probably every one of these at some point.

We are human and we aren't always able to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We aren't always able to give extravagantly, forgetting the cost.

We are, however, a people called by God to live a Christ-like life forgetting what is past and striving towards reunion with God.

God is creating a new way and often an unexpected way.

A way that promises water where we see desert.

A new way where life as represented by bread and wine rises from death.

A new way where trust in God promises life everlasting. **Amen.**