

## 4.03.22 –Lent 5

### “Something New - Grace”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

#### **Isaiah 43:16-21 (The Message) ~ Pam**

This is what God says,  
the God who builds a road right through the ocean,  
who carves a path through pounding waves,  
The God who summons horses and chariots and armies—  
they lie down and then can't get up;  
they're snuffed out like so many candles:  
“Forget about what's happened;  
don't keep going over old history.

Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new.  
It's bursting out! Don't you see it?  
There it is! I'm making a road through the desert,  
rivers in the badlands.

Wild animals will say ‘Thank you!’  
—the coyotes and the buzzards—  
Because I provided water in the desert,  
rivers through the sunbaked earth,  
Drinking water for the people I chose,  
the people I made especially for myself,  
a people custom-made to praise me.

**L: These are Reassuring Words from God!** C: Thanks be to God.

#### **John 12:1-8 (HCSB) ~ Pam**

*Mary Anoints Jesus*

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” <sup>6</sup> (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.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

**L: These are Important Words of God!** C: Thanks be to God.

#### **Please pray with me:**

Oh Jesus, be with us now as we let go of former things and misunderstandings. Be with us now as we open ourselves to the new work and new life you give us. Let our gifts of love and generosity be lavished on our community as Mary gave all she had

in that alabaster jar. Let us ponder your words and live out our faith as we prepare ourselves this Lent for the journey to the cross and the tomb. Lord, speak now through your messenger. **“Amen.”**

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The heat is back on just in time for spring! During a hybrid Pastor’s Fresh Expressions conference this week in Richmond (I was virtual), tornado sirens went off during three speakers! No one had to evacuate there, but we preachers had an object lesson that it is God who controls our weather. For your comfort, please wear layers or bring sweaters for the next few weeks of unpredictable temperatures.

Next week is Palm Sunday and one more week until Easter, so we focus on spiritual preparation. Continue to practice your prayer tools: silence, breath prayers, walking, journaling, Scripture prayers, and confession. This is our discipleship work and spiritual development that is feeding the caterpillar before metamorphosis into the new creation, a butterfly.

The reminder in Isaiah that God is about to “do something brand new” is logical on a Covenant and Communion Sunday, 14 days before Easter (Resurrection Sunday). Through Jesus, God reconciled us to himself in the sacrifice of the cross, which we commemorate today, in the bread and juice, remembering his body and blood. As you reflect on the passages we are studying today, notice the artist’s interpretation on the bulletin cover. You may not like modern art, but you can clearly see the disruption of form, yet the foot, the jar, and Mary’s beauty are evident. Disruption precedes growth. We’ll come back to Mary in a moment.

The Isaiah context is about how God makes all things new, using the Exodus from Egypt experience found in Exodus 14-15 to encourage the Jews in exile in Babylon. The prophet tells the people to forget the

exodus (the former things), because God will do a new work by bringing them out of exile back to Palestine. A third exodus will occur when the Messiah returns to regather his people. “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (vs. 19 <sup>NRSV</sup>).” Have you ever seen a river in the desert? They are usually trickling streams with little water, or a small pond in an oasis. Have you watched National Geographic and seen the thick forests of the Amazon, where a machete could not even cut a way through? What God will do is miraculous, but only comes through faith to those willing to answer God’s call. The prophet says many will stay behind where things are more comfortable, but those who have gratitude will be chosen. God will give them a drink to quench their parched lips, hearts, and minds, creating the new.

The former things, in our reading “history,” is the wilderness journey out of Egypt, but I wonder, what might our former things be for us, or for our church? What must we leave behind (for a caterpillar, its his feet and body shape) to accept what is new (a beautiful set of wings with which to fly)? During Lent it might be something simple we give up like chocolate, sweets, meat, or alcohol. However, this is not a seasonal request. God **demand**s, like the caterpillar, that we give up everything to follow him and receive what is new—his grace and love.

For the church, we do not leave behind our memories, but we leave behind things no longer serving us or the community. It may be physical items to give away, relationships lost through life transitions or death, or programs in the church for those not here at this moment. For several years now, we have been grieving loss and change; all Christian churches are recalibrating and so must we. We are fortunate because United began

reassessment years before the pandemic. Change was introduced at the consolidation, Jerry Young's retirement, then Wayne's. I came on board; staff and members shifted or moved on to other callings as it should be. Mission Center Partners came and went, as time passed. That is dynamic life. During all the changes, we may have struggled emotionally or financially, but God has been with us the whole time! Like pruning dead branches from trees or bushes, we do that painful work in the winter so that new growth and blooms can thrive. If we do not prune, stems and trunks weaken and the whole tree is damaged. Growth is stunted. Keep listening for the work, and the ways we can make room for the new. God calls us to new life and new work; let us trust him during uncertainty.

The disciples felt great uncertainty the weeks before the cross. Prior to the John passage, Jesus had travelled to Bethany to Mary and Martha's home to help Lazarus who was sick and died. They were ecstatic that Jesus raised their brother back to life! Jesus left them for a while but returned for a special dinner held in Lazarus' honor at Simon the Leper's home. In her joy, love, and gratitude to Jesus, Mary emptied a whole jar of expensive perfume onto his feet. Pure nard was a fragrant oil from roots and stems of a northern India herb. It had to be imported in sealed boxes or sealed alabaster jars. Mary used a whole pint of the precious oil as her gift to Jesus. Although not the main point of the story, Judas, the treasurer, complained that it was a wasted expense worth a whole year's wages, about 300 denarii. The poor could have been fed with that money, and he would have kept a small percentage of it for himself. Mary, in contrast, offered it **all** for Jesus. The symbolism of self-sacrifice, gratitude, her intense love of Jesus, and the ritual anointing at one's burial

all pointed toward what was to come. Nard, also used to anoint kings, was symbolic for Jesus' part in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Even after Jesus had explained, "the poor are always with you, but I will not be for much longer," they did not understand. Our focus today is on Mary's generosity and tenderness preparing Jesus for burial. Jesus showed both grace and appreciation to Mary. We observe her extravagant love just as we remember Christ's extravagant sacrificial love for us, illustrated here by the cross, the Lord's Supper, and Jesus' willingness to go to the cross for our redemption.

What is OLD and NEW in our readings today?

1. Letting go of the exodus, while embracing redemption and rescue of the exiled
2. Having patience enough to wait for Jesus and witnessing the rebirth of Lazarus
3. Mary's letting go of her precious perfume to receive the new life in Jesus
4. In your life today and in the life of our church, what must **you** let go of in order to flourish, to serve others, and to receive God's grace which is greater than our sin?

Let's pray and talk about it soon. Amen. |/

**Will you pray with me?** Father God, we don't like to let go of things—good or bad—so please help us to ponder these words and apply them to our personal and church lives. We know you are doing something new in the church universal. Help us to be humble and adaptive enough to empty ourselves to hear you, let go of the superfluous, and to receive paths in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. We thank you for the sacrifice of your Son, who still teaches us and lives within us. Lord, help us demonstrate your love and generosity to others in our path. **Amen.**

***Communion - Pam***