

Passiontide Sunday, 2010

I love the seasons in New England. I love the way spring turns to summer, summer to autumn, autumn to winter, and winter back to spring. And it is in this last, winter into spring, that something happens to us. Something that happens year after year, that is truly transformational.

It seems to me that every year, no matter what our experience the year before, or the year before that; we somehow cannot bring ourselves to completely believe, in our heart of hearts, that spring will really come.

Winters in New Haven are long, and dark; cold, and rainy. And every year, around the beginning of March, we wonder if spring will really come. And we are as giddy as children when it finally does. Like flowers just coming up from the ground we turn our faces to the sun and bask in its warmth. We give up our jackets a little too soon, and abandon ourselves to the miracle of the first daffodil.

It is a holy moment; a transformational time. Spring has arrived, we have a renewed sense of life, and we are lifted out of our winter doldrums just like that.

You can see the transformation; not just in the landscape but in the people. In the bright new smiles; the greetings on the street, “isn’t it a great day!;” the movement of the people from the sidewalk in the shade, to the one in the sun. Winter is over and we are alive!

“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 am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?

Today’s passage from Isaiah is part of a longer salvation oracle proclaiming deliverance to the Babylonian exiles. Just as God parted the waters and created a dry passage to safety in the time of the Exodus, so will God create great rivers and a way in the wilderness, and lead the people back to Jerusalem.

But note the tense of the verbs in this passage. This is not just another revisiting of the Exodus story. It is not a past event coming into remembrance. It is now. Present. God makes a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters; He gives water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. And it is future: God will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

This is a tremendous comfort to us as it was to the Israelites. No matter how far we roam, no matter where our exodus takes us, God will bring us home. But this is not a movement from past to future; from what was to what will be. No, it is a movement from what is, from now, to what will be.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it?”

In today’s gospel reading, we receive John’s version of a story found in all four gospels. A woman, (here, it is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus), lavishes costly oil on Jesus. And not just *oil*, but unseemly affection - she oils his feet, and wipes them with her hair. And in each of the gospel stories one of the characters, (here it is

Judas), objects: “Why don’t we sell the oil and give the money to the poor?”

I do this. Maybe you do too. When I witness extravagant spending on something I wouldn’t spend my money on, I question it. I want to know why something more noble hasn’t been chosen as the recipient of such great wealth. Private trips into space come to mind. \$250,000 for a trip into orbit; for a chance to see the stars up close, and the earth from far away. A lot of money for a transformative moment. Money that would buy a lot of meals, clothes, housing, mosquito nets.

But Mary - she seems to know something we don’t. In each gospel story this anointing with costly oil comes at a pivotal point in the life and ministry of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark it is just after Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, and just before the Passover and last supper. In Luke it occurs just as Jesus is establishing his ministry apart from that of John the Baptist, claiming himself the Son of Man. And in John it is just after the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus’ being marked for death by Caiaphus, and just before his entry into Jerusalem.

Pivotal moments. Transformational moments. And Mary, or the woman, or the sinner, depending on the gospel; this woman, she knows. Somehow she knows. *This is a holy moment.* A moment to be marked; a moment to be honored; a moment in which to dwell, and remember.

“I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it?”

When I lived in Virginia, one of the biggest seasonal differences I noted, was the movement from winter to spring. In Virginia, it seems that

spring happens all at once. You go to bed one night and it’s winter, you wake up the next morning, and somehow everything is blooming. A true miracle bringing the joy of Easter within reach, as if you could reach out and touch the empty tomb.

It doesn’t really happen that way around here, though. Here, we move through a time of mud; of continued danger of frost overnight; of the threat of one last snowstorm. Here, there is a time of transition that’s not so pretty. But even in this God meets us: in the mud of winter into spring; willing us to stop and see the new thing peeking up through the mud, or the snow. Willing us to stop and mark this moment as holy; to anoint it with expensive time; to wipe it with our tears, dry it with our hair; to perceive the newness; to let go of the things of the past; to mark this space in time as a present moving into a future, rather than a past moving beyond a present.

Here we are beginning the fifth week of Lent. A long Lent of quiet days and dark nights, of deprivation and discipline, of waiting and watching. It is in this time of movement from dark to light, from Lent to Easter, from hunger to feast; it is in the mud of winter moving into spring, in the uncertainty of new growth, that God meets us, forging a new path, waiting for us to see it, and anoint it; and then taking us with him to the New Jerusalem.

“I am about to do a new thing; Do you not perceive it?”

Sermon by Mtr. Greta Getlein
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