

C Lent 5 4.3.22

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Focus Statement: Christ Jesus has made us his own.

“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?” Reading this passage for the morning, my first thought was, “yeah God, I perceive it. I’ve been perceiving it. But, fun fact, I’m over it.” Dear people of God, I confess I’m a bit over new things. I’ve never been a giant fan, to be honest, but I used to at least have an appreciation for the importance of them. New things require shifting habits and I’ve always been a creature of habit. But they’re also new and exciting and how we grow and change. So I’ve never been maybe the biggest fan, but I’ve certainly been all for new things. But then there was a global pandemic and just shy of every single thing about my life changed in hours, and just kept changing for the next two years, and man am I ever over it. So, yes God, I perceive that you are doing a new thing. But I’m tired of new.

Here's part, for me at least, of why I think I’m so particularly tired of new, why this new things God wants me, wants us, to perceive, feels hard. Before March of 2020, I always associated change with positive things. Yes, change was hard, and scary, and disorienting, but it was leading somewhere good. You can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, so the saying goes. Yeah, it’s hard but in the end you have an omelet, and that’s pretty good. But as we come out of the broken eggs of the last two years and I start to look for the omelet, well, the result of all these broken eggs doesn’t look delicious. We’re not post-pandemic yet, we’re waning pandemic, but not post and may never be post because we disagree on the basic facts of science. We did a bit of starting to reckon with the continued

issue of race in this country, and then got bogged down in obscure legal arguments.

Everyone's edgy and angry, and oh, guess what, rising inflation, crazy gas prices, and a land war in Russia—a thing that has historically never ended well except this time everybody's got nukes. So, on one hand, I know that I do not want this thing, and I'm smart enough to know that all of these things were there before, that I don't want to go back to the old thing. But I'm hesitant about another new thing, because the most recent new things haven't been that awesome.

And here, dear people of God, is where Mary from our Gospel reading for this morning is a hero and a role model for us. Six days before the Passover, the gospel tells us, also known as six days before Jesus' crucifixion, but none of the disciples have really picked up on that detail yet, though Jesus had certainly been telling them, Jesus and his disciples were at a dinner with Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, the one Jesus had raised from the dead. At first read, it seems like a nice little celebration dinner that Lazarus has been raised. Not unlike the party for the younger brother that we read about last week. But this celebratory dinner is different. There's a tension to this meal, a heaviness, because in John's Gospel, this is the turning point. Lazarus' return to life was the moment that marked Jesus' death. It was seeing the crowd's enthusiasm over Jesus in that moment that set the Pharisees on the path to kill him.

Mary broke the tension in the only way she knew how, by recognizing the reality of it. She took a pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus' feet with it, wiping them with her hair in a pure act of devotion. This is more than just an act of worship or respect, as Jesus

recognized, it was an act of preparation for burial. What Mary did here was make visible, make smellable even, the contradictory hope of Jesus, that in order for there to be life, there first has to be death. For Jesus to save us, save the world, he first has to die. In preparing Jesus' for burial, Mary makes visible the surprising truth of resurrection. Because of what Jesus is about to do, death is no longer the opposite of life. But through Jesus, death becomes a way, the way, to life.

Dear people of God, it has been a time of grief, a season of grief. One of the presenters at the conference I was at this weekend invited us to raise our hands if we'd lost someone close to us in the past two years, many hands went up. Then to raise our hands if we'd lost a familiar space or practice, more hands. Then if we'd lost a routine or ritual, missed an event we'd looked forward to, or a major life event of a loved one, a birthday, graduation, wedding, even a funeral. She then invited us to allow ourselves to see all of those losses as loss, and recognize that there is grief in that, and that feeling of grief is ok. It's ok to be sad, to be angry, to be hurt, from all of the loss, cumulative and collective, that we have experienced, as individuals and as a people. Change isn't always good, as these last two years have reminded us. Change can, and often does, mean hurt, pain, loss, even death. Mary lets us feel that, lets us honor that. Gives us a model to honor and anoint that which we have to let go of. It is important to do that work of grieving. To recognize the reality of loss. Because that honest recognition of letting go is how we get to healing.

And Judas couldn't do that. I think that's probably really what drove Judas to betrayal, at least in part, Judas couldn't recognize that, and when the weight of what Jesus was

proposing hit him, it was more than he could handle. Judas wanted life to be what he'd seen thus far from Jesus, this never-ending march of forward progress, every day better and better, healings, miracles, even the defeat of death, in the presence of Lazarus at the table with him. The possibility of grief, of loss, of pain, and that that could be the path life, Judas just couldn't handle it. And when that grief came, it destroyed him.

Dear people of God, we live in a culture that denies death of all kinds. We fight it, try to hide it, ignore or avoid the inevitability of it in practices, in institutions, and especially in ourselves and in those around us. We do this in the secular world, in a million practices to preserve life at all costs, to disguise the sneaking realities of death. But we also do this in the church, in a more subtle way. We skip over death to talk about being in a better place. And here let me pause really quick and say I'm not saying that is not true. I think it is true. I certainly believe in the resurrection of the dead, I believe that even at the grave we make our song alleluia because we dwell where we have always dwelled, in the very heart of God. But what I am saying is, death is painful, grief is real, and it is ok to feel sad, hurt, angry, confused, alone, when someone or something you love dies. It is also ok to relief, peace, calm, whatever. This is often a feeling if the death and suffering has been drawn out, but even if it's been quick, you may feel relief in knowing that it's over now. One of the gifts of this season of Lent is it gives us space to sit with these feelings of grief, to practice them even, so that when we need them, they are there. And Mary offers us one model, only one, there are as many as there are people, but this is a helpful one, one model of how to honor the life lived and the reality of its ending, in anointing Jesus' feet with costly oil and wiping that oil with her hair. Honor, grieve, and let go. Because here is the promise that comes

three days later. New life, something else, always emerges. Death is not the end, not for the one who has died and not for those left behind.

This is hard work, dear people of God. Letting go is hard, grieving is hard. And we have been, are, sitting with a lot of grief. We are people of the resurrection, we know resurrection is coming, but waiting for it, wow. I started the sermon talking about not being too keen on this new thing God is doing, because it's all exhausting. But here's the good news, dear people of God. Good news on top of the promise of resurrection, which is great news but hard to hang onto sometimes. The good news, is that God has us in this. In grief, in change, in hope, in fear, we go forward in the words of Paul, "pressing on to make [the promise of God our] own, because Christ Jesus has made [us] his own." Dear people of God, God has you. God always has, God always will. In life, in death, in joy, in sadness, in grief, in hope. God has you. So press on. Weep, laugh, mourn, dance, God's got you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.