

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 3, 2022

Faith, Okemos

Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

...Beyond the sacred page, I seek you Lord; my spirit waits for you, O living Word.
ELW 515

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19

A Way in the Wilderness

It is hard to get out of my mind the pictures of crushed and burned out apartment buildings in Mariupol, Ukraine ...or the bodies, both Ukrainian and Russian, lying in the streets or on the roads of that war-torn country. In this fifth week of the Russian invasion, it is hard for me to see how this beleaguered nation could soon, if ever, be restored....so many people dying, so many hungry and thirsty and cold and homeless.

All I have, all we have, is faith in a faithful God who will abandon neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian people, whether in life or death, whether in victory or defeat. Only faith in a faithful God can see God, can see Jesus, can see the Holy Spirit at work in the trouble minds, frightened souls, bitter and hardened hearts of the people and the leaders of both countries.

All we have, all we are given is trust in a God who suffers and dies and rises again for all the nations of the world, for all, humans and animals alike:

I will make a way in the wilderness. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise...

A way in the wilderness, created anew in us each day, enables us to see beyond the present darkness both in our country and abroad, enables us to give generously of ourselves, of our time, of our financial resources to alleviate some of the spiritual, emotional, and physical suffering in our own homes and communities and in countries like Ukraine and Russia.

I am about to do a new thing... Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, has been resuscitated and in overwhelming gratitude this family puts on a dinner for Jesus. God in Jesus has brought a dead person back to life, made a way through the wilderness and the barrenness of death.

I am about to do a new thing

Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly nard valued at 300 denarii, equivalent to a year's wages. Mary wipes his feet with her hair. an extravagant, "over the top," expression of love. But, as we often find in John's gospel, acts like this have a double, deeper meaning: nard was used in the preparation of a body for burial. Mary's radical act of love is not only in gratitude for bringing her brother back to life but also given in anticipation of Jesus' death. In Mary's heart God is surely doing a new thing.

Thus Mary's act of love is a sign of what Jesus would do not only for Lazarus but for the whole world. Jesus would soon suffer and die for the people of Ukraine and Russia. Jesus would suffer and die for us in this room and for those worshiping with us online. And on the third day Jesus would rise from death so that all people, all of creation, could also rise from death, all could be delivered from all the fearsome forces and faults of life that would separate us from joy and peace with God and with each other. In and through Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection God was doing a new thing, a new thing that would transform the wilderness of our earthly journey, the dangerous but necessary journey for all who would come to know and trust in the life-giving power of this ever gracious, ever watchful, ever forgiving God.

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...

St. Paul was forever changed by his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. [Acts 9] Before this encounter, Paul (Saul) lived an exemplary life of scrupulous adherence to the law of Moses. In his own words, he was "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." He prided himself on his zeal for keeping the letter of the law, which also meant harsh judgment and persecution of those who broke the law as he understood it. In his understanding the Christian movement, the church, was clearly heretical, false, and blasphemous. Clearly it needed to be purged from society, violently if necessary... [cf. Acts 7-8:1]

But when Jesus appeared to him, asking "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" his life was changed forever. In the Second Reading for today Paul writes,

“Whatever gains I had [in my former life], these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ...I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”

What happened to Paul was a whole new understanding of the new thing God was doing in Christ Jesus. In Jesus’ life and suffering and death and resurrection, God’s law had been fulfilled. Now what mattered above all was to believe in, to trust in what the Lord Jesus had done for him and for the whole world. His righteousness was not his own by striving to keep the law but rather the righteousness of God imparted to him and experienced by him through trust, through faith in Christ. Now what mattered, all that mattered, is that he, a daily forgiven sinner, strove to live by the law of love and compassion, love for God, love and kindness for all, all for whom Jesus had died. For Paul that meant in every way possible, with as many people as possible, to declare the new thing God had done for them in Christ.

Once, many hundreds of years ago, God had set free God’s children from slavery in Egypt through what we call the exodus. Many years later, when God’s children had been forcefully taken from their homeland, living for some 70 years as exiles in Babylon, Isaiah declared that the Lord would again deliver them, would make a way for them through the wilderness. They would be chosen anew to be bearers of praise for God’s faithfulness and blessings and promises of deliverance for the whole world. This would be a new thing, a new exodus.

And now in Christ, yet another exodus has been given to us. Through faith in Christ, through the faithfulness of Christ, all of can be set free from our bondage to sin and death and the power of the Evil One. Now, in the wilderness of our lives, in our damaged and broken world, in the devastation of warfare in Ukraine, in the destruction caused by cyclones and years-long droughts in nations like Madagascar, in the worldwide spread of diseases like the Omicron BA-2 variant, the Lord is about to do a new thing. Through acts of extravagant generosity like Mary did in gratitude for what Jesus had done for her brother and for her family, and for what Jesus would do for all people through his death on the cross, we too can, with thankful hearts, show the world that God is about to do a new thing, making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, giving the water of life for all God’s children.

Amen.

JDS