

5th Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019
Church of the Advent

Extravagant Journey

If you were asked what was the best trip you ever took, what would come to mind first? It might have involved travel to a foreign country, or a wilderness, or to a big and exciting city. It could have been an adventure you took on your own, a family gathering or a pilgrimage to a holy site. In any case I would bet that the anticipation of the trip, and the planning and purchasing (or borrowing) of just the right clothing, shoes and equipment needed, was part of the pleasure of the experience. For me, I always loved the excuse to wander into an REI store before a trip, even if all I came out with was new socks.



I think of our rich and varied readings today---the poetry of Isaiah, an exhortation from Paul, and a story from John the Evangelist---like a gift card to REI, offering a variety of options to be packed for our journey through this Fifth week of Lent, towards Palm Sunday and into Holy Week. For if we take our journey through Lent seriously, in order to savor its potential impact in our lives with God, some planning and packing is helpful, even if undertaken late in the game. Prayer, worship, reading scripture for the words and images that break open our hearts a little, are all preparations that make room for traveling towards our ultimate destination---the joy of Easter.

First, our passage from Isaiah speaks with anticipation of something new and wonderful to a people who had been living in an exile of their own making:

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

This promise of God is particularly special to me because its words were quilted onto a wall hanging in the sanctuary of my seminary, offering a blanket of comfort and support for each one who had been called to that space for prayer and worship along a multitude of unique spiritual journeys. These words from Isaiah describe the magnitude and graciousness of God's mercy and the power of new beginnings. Moving through the liturgies of Lent is like accompanying Jesus the Messiah on his own journey of new beginnings from Galilee to Jerusalem, through his ultimate new beginning from death to life. The words of Isaiah remind us that no matter how long the trip or where each journey takes us, there will be water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Paul is continually packing and repacking for his journeys in the name of Christ. In his letter to the Philippians, he seems to be focusing on *emptying* his pack of what had become superfluous and heavy along his way. He discounts all that he had counted on in the past--his righteousness in being a good Jew--being a Pharisee of the Tribe of Benjamin and a former blameless persecutor of Christians. All of Paul's former credentials which had helped him make his way in the world were dumped out as rubbish. Paul saw instead that the most important thing he required to forget what lay behind, to strain forward to what lay ahead, and to press on toward the goal of becoming one with Christ through grace, was his *faith*; so he lightened his load to make room for this one efficient and essential thing to equip him for his continuing journey.

And then we come to John, who narrates the story of Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who had decided that for her journey what she needed was an expensive and costly alabaster jar of nard, an aromatic oil as precious as a high tech tent or new hiking boots or a fiber fill jacket

that keeps you warm in temperatures down to zero but feels as light as a feather on your back. Meant for use in preparing dead bodies for their final resting place in a tomb, nard was an important and precious commodity, and Mary chose to break open her jar and lavish *all* of it onto the dirty road weary feet of Jesus. John first describes Mary's act as extravagant, lavish, exorbitant, even as the disciple Judas called the act wanton and irresponsible and out of proportion to the resources of their community. To Judas it was foolishness--whether or not he was skimming from the common purse or truly cared about the poor. Perhaps the others present were also shocked--including Mary's sister Martha and the other disciples; perhaps they were unable to express their dismay or lacked the guts to say anything. After all, they were dining in the presence of Lazarus, a man who had so recently been raised from the dead before their eyes, and likely himself to be struck dumb by this scene meant to honor the friend who had not long before brought him back to the land of the living.

Much is often made of Mary's act of wiping up the excess oil with her hair, and of the implications of that counter-cultural behavior have led to centuries of speculation regarding the relationship between Mary and Jesus. John says that Jesus told Judas to back off and leave Mary alone, just as he did in an earlier encounter with Martha, who had on an earlier occasion begged the Lord to bid Mary to help her in the kitchen instead of sitting adoringly and uselessly at his feet. The gospels do not clarify or embellish the relationship of Mary and Jesus to the extent that historical imaginations have in the hundreds of years since, though Mary was one of the few people who stuck it out at the foot of the cross, and the first to arrive at the empty tomb. Perhaps John's story is a prequel to these more important devotions of Mary, who loved Jesus with an extravagant love that overcame any fear of personal risk or reprisal--whether from friends, family or authorities. That broken-open jar of costly nard represented a heart broken open to receive the extravagant love of God through the gift of Jesus Christ, its rich overpowering aroma foreshadowing the extravagant sacrifice that Jesus was about to make, and of his overcoming of death itself by rising from the grave.

In the next two weeks we will hear sequels to this story as Jesus continues his journey, beginning with a triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which we commemorate next week on Palm Sunday. Then on Maundy Thursday we celebrate his sitting down for a last supper with his

disciples and demonstrating his extravagant love for them by washing *their* feet, and by instituting the sacrament of Holy Eucharist---offering his broken body in the form of bread, his lifeblood in the form of wine. We then move into Good Friday to remember his overnight arrest while praying in a garden for his cup to pass, and later his humiliation and torture before being condemned to death. Each step along his Way of the Cross was taken purposefully and deliberately. Every moment of betrayal and brokenness Jesus experienced along his journey was met with humility and graciousness. And when he was laid at last into a newly hewn tomb which his followers expected to be his final destination, he carried on his broken and crucified body the extravagant and aromatic memory of Mary's loving anointing as a foreshadowed preparation for his burial.

The ultimate story of the extravagant love of God, beyond all darkness, all sadness and all sacrifice is told upon arrival at our ultimate destination---the empty tomb. To know that Jesus accomplished victory over the grave and conquered death itself is a gift worthy of every extravagant, exorbitant, precious offering we can conjure from all of Creation. But it is not our job to come up with something expensive or lavish enough to prove the depth of our gratitude to God, but rather to break *ourselves* open, making our whole lives a living sacrifice, as Paul said. Preparing ourselves for the road to resurrection is less about the stuff we try to take with us, and more about cleaning out our bags, lightening the load, making room primarily for our faith to grow along the way, and looking for that *new thing* that God might be doing on the road ahead, where there will always be a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. May these last days of your Lenten journey be filled with meaning, with peace, and with extravagant grace. Amen.