

5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 4.6.25

Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 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. 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.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 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. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (301)

The last we heard, the authorities had given orders to have Jesus arrested. Just prior to this retreat to Bethany, the Gospel of John says it quite plain: "...the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him."

Mary and Martha and Lazarus: they were here harboring a fugitive.

The reason he was a fugitive, the proximate cause for the priests' desire to have Jesus arrested: it was that Jesus had raised someone from the dead, Jesus had raised Lazarus from being dead. And this was entirely too much. This was in total violation to anything the world could handle, could contain. Which means this, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, was to condemn himself to death. In doing so, Jesus was essentially trading places with Lazarus. Which Jesus knew. It's why he wept, Jesus did, if you ask me anyway.

This raising of Lazarus was the seventh and final sign according to John, this book of signs. Don't call them miracles; they are, according to John, signs. They signify something even greater than the sign itself.

Don't get me wrong, the signs were pretty great. Turning water into wine, healing people who were gravely ill, walking on water, making a man born blind to see, feeding 5,000 people of five loaves of bread and two fish, and now this, raising Lazarus from the dead. But these are signs

according to the Gospel of John, not meant to amaze on their own, not meant to move anyone to faith on their own, meant rather as signs to signify something greater still.

What they signified is the abiding of God in Jesus, what such intimate abiding with God looks like, what indeed is the will of God for God's created and still-to-be perfected world. What does God look like, these signs mean to answer. God looks like healing, restoring, perfecting and making whole, defeating death. So how shall we live as children of God? We shall heal and restore and feed and live our lives beyond death, not captive to its frightening power and not making captives of others through any terrorizing use of its frightening power.

This is what the raising of Lazarus might have meant to signify.

It's sometimes pointed out that this wasn't a resurrection, that Lazarus in being raised wasn't to free him from death, he wasn't now on the other side of death. He would die again. He was raised back to life in the world which is to say he would die again. But now death might be seen among the living as merely a threshold and not an ending, and certainty not an annihilation whose result is non-being, non-being for the one who once had being.

That said, this shouldn't suggest that the event of his raising wasn't a terrifying display, terrifying to the order of the world as it's always been known and as people have always lived amidst and power has always played out and been used to secure some and exploit most. Because if death isn't something to be frightened of, then what of the power of those who benefit from people's fear of it? What of kings who have the power to kill with impunity? What of the state, with its so-called monopoly on violence, the only entity in a civilized modern world with the right to use violence by which we establish what's called "good order"?

This sign was the mightiest of all seven because it cast into doubt the ultimate threat of those who would hold the world together and make it run.

Which they couldn't have.

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead condemned Jesus to death, trading places in the tomb.

Which is why Jesus wept, as the story notes he did, arriving at the terrible stillness of the stopped-up tomb. He wept. Then he said, "Lazarus, come out." And from then on, the authorities would hunt for him, would make good on their goal to have him executed.

Which he knew would happen.

And which had him weep.

And then, in spite of that, had him act.

I had the occasion recently to look up that Pulitzer Prize winning photo, the one from 1968 when students at Cornell University affiliated with the Afro-American Society had occupied Willard Straight Hall. They did this, according to an article in the *Cornell Chronical*, “to protest Cornell's perceived racism, its judicial system and its slow progress in establishing a black studies program.” The occasion of my looking it up was talking with Tobias about his radical education. He’s come to enjoy one professor in particular, Ibtesam Al Atiyat, in the philosophy department at St. Olaf. She allows him—encourages him—to think way outside the accepted “good order” of *Pax Americana*, such as it is, such as it was.

I told him not to think his education out of bounds began with Ibtesam, as exciting a teacher as she sounds to be; and I pulled up this picture from 1968. Pointing to one of the armed activists imaged there, I named him, Skip Meade, the husband of Tobias’ preschool teacher, Paula Meade. Skip died a few years ago, but in my time knowing him I’d often talk with him about those thirty-six hours of the armed takeover, how he’d been fairly sure he’d be killed at that encounter. He even called his father before heading out to Willard Straight Hall to say good-bye. True, the National Guard killing of the student at Kent State hadn’t happened yet, was two years hence. But that’s where we were heading as a society. That’s the mood that was growing and overtaking.

Can you imagine heading out into your day feeling like it was a toss-up over whether you’d be shot and killed or arrested and disappeared? Can you imagine?

You might have to.

We might have to.

Heather Cox Richardson, historian and not known for being a hot-head, has been testifying lately in her daily “Letters from an American,” that the arresting and disappearing of people permitted to be in the United States is but a thin line away from naturalized citizens being denaturalized and then deported, which is but a thin line away from those natural-born citizens who though espouse ideas disloyal to the regime being arrested and disappeared. We are fools to think they’ll stop themselves. We keep thinking it, collectively, we do anyway. But they haven’t stopped themselves yet.

Jesus wept. And then he said, “Lazarus, come out.” You do needs to be done.

The stink that was anticipated at the tomb finds interesting contrast in the sweetness of the nard just a few verses hence. It’s an easy contrast to overlook. The fact is this fifth sense, the sense of smell, isn’t much mentioned in the gospels. It’s mentioned in Deuteronomy, it’s mentioned in the Psalms, it’s mentioned in Genesis, each in reference to the scent of sacrifice, smelling an

appeal to the Lord. Where it's mentioned in the prophets, it's likewise in reference to sacrifice as central to worship, but here the Lord hates such grandiose display while the way the people lived was in total violation to what they professed. Their worship said, "We are righteous." Their living said, "We couldn't care less about righteousness, about justice."

But the gospels are largely silent about the sense of smell.

Which is not that remarkable a thing. First of all, the Gospels nearly never have us in the Temple, and never at all at the Temple altar for sacrifice. Then there's the fact that, of all the senses, smell is the one least able to be recalled. It's difficult to put in words how something smells. With the sense of smell, you really had to be there.

Which means when it comes up it's worth taking a moment to notice it, especially if it comes up in the Gospel of John, this gospel narrative in which nothing should be read as anything less than included by very careful conscious choice.

The mention of smell in this Gospel of John is to invite a contrast.

Jesus had been warned by those who'd gathered to mourn the death of Lazarus. He'd been warned. It was Martha who said it, Lazarus' sister warning Jesus when, having approached the tomb, he ordered those also near, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Jesus something obvious, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." And you have to wonder why she said it, and you have to wonder why the gospel writer went to the trouble to make note of it. Was it to emphasize how very dead Lazarus already was? Was it to lay it on thick that Jesus could have come sooner, could indeed have come prior to Lazarus having died at all? This whole thing: Jesus could have prevented it, which Martha already said once, so maybe this is her saying it again?

Martha, after all, had been shown to be fastidious in her doing. In the gospel of Luke, she and Mary are remembered to have likewise hosted Jesus in their home, but whereas Mary listened at the feet of Jesus while he taught, Martha was busy with many tasks, being the proper hostess, but not particularly gracious about, outdoing her sister in the doing of things, but with a fair measure of resentment.

Here we see Martha perhaps acting exactly like Martha, pointing out where people have fallen short in her sight.

That said, I think it more likely a literary choice on the part of our writer and serving a theological purpose. The death of Lazarus, like all death, is cruel and unclean, is a thing of repulse,

revulsion. Your gut tells you to stay away from it, and so you should—and the stench of it will make it so you can't help but do so, you can't help but stay away.

But death will be different when it comes to Jesus' death. Jesus' death won't wreak of rot and annihilation. It will be sweet as a garden blooming in spring. It will be, especially according to John, given the details included here, a sweetness, a blossoming. Anointed in luscious nard, buried in a blooming garden, Jesus' death turns the whole terrible fact of death inside out.

Nard is a lavish thing to have on hand. Judas was right about that. Mary having what was worth about a year's wages for a common laborer, she must have gone to great effort to get this. It's not something she kept in some drawer somewhere. And it's money enough to have a difference in someone's life, someone who had no other means for getting money and covering costs. Judas was right about that too.

The story notes that's not why he said as much, and we have little reason to doubt the narrative voice. Elsewhere Judas is remembered as envious, envious of Jesus' power and appeal. At best, he was an idealist who couldn't tolerate when things didn't meet his ideals, a zealot who'd rather have revolution than what seems Jesus' tendency for capitulating co-existence. "Let it be so for now," didn't Jesus once say about this imperfect, disappointing, compromised world? Living in its midst, accepting of its compromised daily offerings of opportunity and foreclosure: "Let it be so for now."

No! I won't accept that, Judas might have essentially said, might have essentially lived, which I get. I can understand not wanting to accept any of this. I get wanting to plant a fist in the face of this immutable world, cold, hard, unfeeling, planting a fist in the gut of such grinding frustration and dissatisfaction.

I can't stand how close we were in our worship in Monterey, tiny Monterey; how close we were to the place of disappearance of those laborers a couple weeks ago. What a stupid thing to be doing, I find myself thinking, sitting in our sanctuary speaking of Jesus while people within this tiny parish are being kidnapped by the state. What a humiliation to be so unable to live up to our profession of faith.

But what else can we do? At this point, at this moment, what else can we do but pour out the nard and anoint the one who will die so that all might live?

The moment has not come. But for Jesus it is coming. And for us it might come. Some moment when what comes is a chance to make a difference, a chance to live in the kingdom of God, whatever might happen to our citizenship in the kingdoms of this world.

This poor situation will always be with. This world impoverished of the impossible imperative truth of God will always be with us—whereas God will arrive in but a moment. That we might ready. That we might be ready.

Thanks be to God.