



The Scent of Salvation

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ April 7, 2019*

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."

Psalm 126

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| 1 | When God restored the fortunes of Zion, * | and we are glad indeed. |
| | then were we like those who dream. | |
| 2 | Then was our mouth filled with laughter, * | 5 Restore our fortunes, O God, * |
| | and our tongue with shouts of joy. | like the watercourses of the Negev. |
| 3 | Then they said among the nations, * | 6 Those who sowed with tears * |
| | "God has done great things for them." | will reap with songs of joy. |
| 4 | God has done great things for us, * | 7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, * |
| | | will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves. |

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

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."

So here we are. We're getting closer to the end now. In our Gospel text, Jesus is being anointed in anticipation of his death, in an act of lavish devotion by Mary of Bethany.

This passage, of course, startles us. Mary's action seems sensuous, even erotic. We're not quite sure what to make of its strangeness. So some of us will want to pass right over the feet and the hair and the costly perfumed oil... jumping right to the conundrum of the statement: "you always have the poor with you."

But I think we would be wise to linger with the feet and the hair and the oil, at least for a few moments.

During my first Holy Week at St. Peter's, I remember being told that you probably wouldn't have your feet washed on Maundy Thursday.

A brave few, yes, but certainly not the multitudes. I was told not to be disappointed when most of you didn't come forward, when you stayed in your pews and exempted yourself from this holy encounter. But I was determined. I was determined to wash your feet. And many of you did come forward that year. Many more, I was told, than had ever come forward before. You came forward barefooted. Bare feet on cold stone. And then...

Warm water. Skin in touch with skin. A cotton towel. And then it's over. Just a moment. A moment of contact.

But some of you teared up. Some of you smiled. Some of you made eye contact. Some of you looked away. It's hard to be completely indifferent to this act. Even if you're not quite sure what it means. Not quite sure what it does. Not quite sure if it matters.

Ritualized touch. Holy touch. In a world terrified of touching. In a world where touching has earned a terrible reputation. Perceived more often as a source of harm than as a source of healing. Touch is experienced largely as threatening, dangerous—because it has been misused far too often, especially in the church.

And yet still, touch can move us. Still, we crave touch. Still, touch can be safe, sacred, moving, transformative.

I remember that back when I lived on my own in Vermont for 3 years, I decided to treat myself to a massage every other week. And I did so largely because I needed to be touched, needed to be reminded that I was human. I sometimes cried on the table as the built-up lack of human contact was slowly remediated, for at least an hour and its afterglow.

And yet, many of us are so hesitant to admit that we need touch, that we get too little of it, that it matters. We get embarrassed about being enfleshed creatures with real physical needs—including the need for contact, for touch.

You see, touch is not a luxury. Touch isn't silly or superfluous. Touch can, at its best, be holy, transformative, sacramental.

Which is why, like Mary, we often use oil to amplify the church's ritualized forms of sacred touch. We touch with oil at baptism. We touch with oil in illness and at death. And we have special oils for these purposes. Here at St. Peter's, our holy oils are tucked away in a cabinet in the Altar Guild sacristy. We get a new supply each year, blessed by the Bishop during a Holy Week liturgy at the cathedral, with all the clergy of the Diocese gathered together. Each priest takes a supply back to his or her parish, to be used for these holy moments. And we get a lot of oil. Too much oil for the handful of baptisms we do each year and for the number of times we anoint the sick and the dying. We'll be getting a new supply next Tuesday.

So I'd like to share the Chrism with you: the wonderfully fragrant oil we use at baptism. Most of you probably don't remember your baptisms, probably can't remember the strong scent of balsam that can permeate the whole church, if you use enough of it. But I think we need to remember. We need to invite the olfactory imagination, our sense of smell, to participate in our hearing of today's Gospel text.

[I have some small containers of oil here that I'd like you to pass around the church to smell and enjoy. Please don't hesitate to move around a bit in order to share them.]

Now, while you smell and enjoy, I invite you to think about and imagine Mary pouring a copious quantity of a similar substance over Jesus' feet. An extremely messy act. Perhaps, to some, a wasteful act. A non-sensical act, at least to the rational mind.

But a beautiful, moving, and meaningful act for the nose, for the senses. A way of marking this moment, this encounter, this relationship—as sacred, holy, transformative.

Indeed, the ancient world was ripe with odor of both human and animal origin, so sacred spaces were set apart by making them smell sweet. As such, Mary is participating in a long tradition of demarcating a sacred space, a place where she has encountered the Holy, by perfuming it with a luxurious scent. This scent expresses all that

Jesus has meant to her...and how she has encountered the Holy in him Indeed, Jesus had just raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead. And Mary is grateful. So incredibly grateful.

Mary's action isn't that difficult to understand. It reminds me of several instances in which I've purchased a gift for an upcoming holiday. Then, while waiting for the holiday to arrive, I have occasionally, while feeling a strong sense of love or gratitude for the gift's intended recipient, found myself running to get the not-yet-wrapped gift and giving it then-and-there, saying: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I just couldn't wait! I really want you to have it!"

This is the kind of energy I imagine that Mary might have had, when she cracked open the jar containing an entire pound of expensive perfumed oil. The wonderful energy of overflowing love that could only find expression in the gratuity of such an extravagant gift.

And as I imagine Jesus in this scene, I see him breathing in deeply, enjoying the gorgeous aroma that has suddenly filled the room, grateful for Mary's love and for this moment of respite. Tears welling in his eyes with awe at the care that is being shown to him. Because these last days have been difficult. His ministry has been under intensifying scrutiny, and he knows that the end is coming closer and closer.

In fact, the lectionary omits several telling verses at the end of this passage. John tells his readers that, just as Jesus' feet were being anointed a great crowd learned where Jesus was...

“...and they came [there] not only because of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”

The end was most surely coming. Plans were being made. And while some realized how little time they had left with Jesus, and seized the moment to say “thank you” and “I love you,” others, like Judas, could only sneer at such expressions of devotion.

And I don't think the poor are really the cause of Judas' objection. Rather, I think Judas was simply uncomfortable. Uncomfortable... perhaps because he already knew what he was going to do. Perhaps because his heart had already hardened toward Jesus, and he couldn't bear to witness this display of love. The love he had once felt. Maybe still felt. The love that he felt he had to kill, in order to to save himself when Jesus went down.

It was all too much for Judas. The feet, the hair, the oil. The appalling intimacy of it all. This boundless faith in a man who was about to be done away with. Didn't they get it yet? Didn't they see where this was going? That they could all go down with him?

Maybe they did know. Or maybe they didn't. But for this moment, at least, there's a dinner party happening. And a beautiful aroma wafting out the windows, beckoning the curious crowd ever closer. People are still ready to believe in Jesus. Even now. Even this close to the end. So here we are. Won't you pull up a chair, and stay for awhile?

Amen.