

“Look Ahead”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
April 3, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Today is the fifth Sunday of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday, and then Easter.

In our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, God says to look ahead, yet it begins with looking back. In our Gospel lesson from John, Jesus, and those around him are looking ahead at what will soon happen.

So, do we look ahead or do we look back at life. Our past got us to where we are today. The past is full of memories, both good and bad. The future is unknown. Here we are today. Since the pandemic started, my three brothers and I have gotten together almost weekly for Zoom meetings. Yes, we do talk about the past as we share memories. We know that we cannot go back, but we can keep the memories alive in our hearts. The farm that we grew up on was sold many years ago, and all the buildings have long been taken down. All we have are our memories except for a few mementos that I have kept, and that is about all I have from my youth.

We tend to live in multiple time frames. We have our memories. We are here today. And we are looking forward to tomorrow.

Today’s reading is the first stanza of a long salvation oracle running from Isaiah 43:14 through 44:5 which, in turn, is part of Second Isaiah’s amazing proclamation of deliverance to the Babylonian exiles (Isaiah 40-55). Whereas God had previously used Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian hordes to destroy Jerusalem and haul the fruit and flower of Judah into exile in Babylon in 587 and 582 BCE, Second Isaiah now dramatically announces that God is about to use Cyrus and his Persian forces to defeat Babylon and release captive Israel, allowing them to return to their homeland. Hear now these words of hope from Isaiah 43 beginning with verse 16:

Old Testament: Isaiah 43:16-21 (CEB)

- ¹⁶ The LORD says—who makes a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
- ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and battalion;
they will lie down together and will not rise;

- they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick.
- ¹⁸ Do not remember the prior things;
do not ponder ancient history.
- ¹⁹ Look! I am doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?
I am making a way in the desert,
paths in the wilderness.
- ²⁰ The beasts of the field,
the jackals and ostriches, will honor me,
because I have put water in the desert
and streams in the wilderness
to give water to my people,
my chosen ones,
- ²¹ this people whom I formed for myself,
who will recount my praise.

The Israelites are hundreds of miles from home; some scholars say the distance was nearly 1700 miles, while others maintain that it was “only” nine hundred miles. The difference is probably between “as the crow flies” and “as the rivers flow.” If they followed the well-watered route of the Euphrates and other rivers, it would be the longer mileage. If they took the “short cut” straight across the Arabian Desert, there would be nine hundred miles of burning sand, and not a drop of water to drink apart from the occasional oasis.

But any escape route was nothing more than idle speculation for the Jewish captives because Babylon was still firmly in control; Cyrus the Persian was still far off in the geographical and chronological distance. The recipients of these prophetic words were nowhere close to where they wanted to be, and they had no hope of ever getting there.

The God of Abraham through Isaiah gave them hope. Audacious. Unbridled. Expansive. Fulsome. Yet not fanciful or fabricated. But rooted in the realities of the past and present and leaning fully into the conviction of what God can and will yet do for God's people. This passage boasts of God's power and goodness, portraying a God who cannot be stopped in their commitment to redeem God's people. There is no challenge too hard, no obstacle too great, no body of water too wide, no desert too dry to keep God from creating or recreating the

necessary conditions for God's people to flourish and all of creation to rise up in praise to God.

This is a text to read when it feels like the world is crashing down around us, when our minds are too jaded, and our spirits too discouraged to see how God may be present in our current darkness. This is the passage to read when the dull thrum of life's rhythms feel especially meaningless and tortured. This is the text to read during Lent when we come face to face with the mess we as humans have made of our relationships and of this world, when we recognize how profoundly broken and how incapable of fixing ourselves we are. For it is in this place of helplessness and disorientation that hope emerges.

For the original audience, this word came to them in exile—their past a trail of broken dreams, disappointments, shame and horror, their present filled with the constant ache for home. Consumed by the past and present, I imagine there was little mental or emotional energy to think about the future. It was enough just to get up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other. Into this situation, the prophet's voice resounds, calling the people not to despair but to hope. Why? Because the same God who brought this people out of the land of Egypt is not yet done with them. Babylon is not an end but rather, an opportunity for God to display his power and his grace to his people once again.

Perhaps that is why Isaiah begins the text the Lectionary appoints for this Sunday by recalling Israel's past. He reminds her of her exodus from Egypt, particularly of God's making a way for her through the Red Sea on dry land. Isaiah also reminds Israelites of the tragic fate of her Egyptian captors who drowned when God allowed the Red Sea to return to its natural ways. The language is vivid and gripping.

This text gives us an opportunity to reflect on the act of remembering, especially remembering God's acts of faithfulness. How important is it for God's people to remember what God has done? Just what things God has done should we make sure we remember? How can we cultivate a culture of remembering in a society that remembers little? What role does remembering God's past faithfulness play in generating confidence in God's ongoing faithfulness? How do we look ahead?

Our Gospel text from John has Jesus at a crossroads between days before and days ahead. Jesus and others are at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus for a meal. Lazarus had been raised from the dead only days before the meal. Can

you imagine the joy that the family feels? And then Mary does a most unusual action that we hear from the 12th chapter of John:

Gospel: John 12:1-8 (CEB)

Mary Anoints Jesus' Feet

12 Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2** Lazarus and his sisters hosted a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was among those who joined him at the table. **3** Then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus' feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the perfume. **4** Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, **5** "This perfume was worth a year's wages. Why was not it sold and the money given to the poor?" (**6** He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

7 Then Jesus said, "Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it. **8** You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez wrote: Mediterranean culture dictated that slaves or women were in charge of washing and anointing the feast guests.

"Messiah" is a Hebrew word translated as "anointed." In the proximity of the Passover independence celebration, Mary anointed the Anointed. In this passage, we see that the Gospel of John offers a radical view of the power that women hold. Here Jesus is anointed (given power) by a woman from the countryside, from the working class, from the laity.

Mary anointed Jesus' feet.

In that time and place, it was taboo for a man to be touched by a woman. Still more, women's loose hair was perceived as being sensual by men in the Galilean culture, as it is still true in some segments of present-day society. The same Mary that anointed Jesus' feet is the same one who had sat at his feet to study.

For Jesus, women are more than sexual objects and children-rearing machines. That's why Jesus does not have a problem with being touched by women, seeing them with their hair down, with women talking to men or being active with their bodies and alive in their senses. In short, in the Reign of God women are equal at the intellectual level, at the salary level, and at all levels.

Mary anointed Jesus with a costly perfume.

According to Mark 14:5 the perfume price was three hundred denarii, namely, a yearly salary; but Mary didn't care. She put that recently coined money in its place: at Jesus' feet.

Mary's anointing (12:3) is a prophetic act that is both a sign of Jesus' kingship and its formal announcement. Anointing with oil or perfume had many purposes in antiquity. For kings and priests, anointing meant consecration for a specific purpose (see Exodus 40:15; 1 Samuel 16:12). The sick were anointed as a ritual of healing (e.g., Mark 6:13; James 5:14) and the dead anointed for burial (e.g., Mark 16:1). Theoretically, Mary's act could have meant any of these things. However, in the trial scenes, John will go on to point repeatedly to Jesus' kingship. Because of this literary context, Mary's actions anticipate and enact the notion that Jesus is king.

Mary anointed Jesus with a costly perfume as she looked ahead.

Emerson Powery wrote: Lent is a time to remember that **death** is always in the air. To die is part of what it means to be human. Time within a pandemic is an unfortunate daily reminder of our collective human frailty. When death strikes close to home, most are not fully prepared for the passing of loved ones. Death has a smell and death provides a memory of the loved ones lost. Yet John 12 is a reminder that death will not have the final word. Lazarus is a reminder of that promise, even though his human body will die again. The ointment is a reminder of that promise. The people who gathered for another meal are a reminder of that promise. The prepared, anointed body of Jesus, of course, is the ultimate reminder of that promise. Death will not have the final word. During the season of Lent, we remember that death will not have the final word.

Isaiah prophesized that God would be doing a new thing. The new thing was sending his son into the world, to go to the cross for each one of us.

Easter is coming. The tomb was empty. He is risen. Thanks be to God. Amen.

