

Year C Lent 5 Let Us Perceive It John 12 vv1 to 8

“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.” God speaks these words through his prophet, Isaiah, at a time when the Israelites were in desperate need of hope. They were in a foreign land, living as slaves to the Babylonians who had conquered Jerusalem and taken them captive. God seemed to be far from them. God seemed to have abandoned them.

But God has made a promise – All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you, he had told Abraham. There will be beauty, peace, and joy in my kingdom on earth, he had assured the Israelites. All peoples will eat together at the banquet of God in the wholeness and security of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. Today, God lets us know, in no uncertain terms, he’s working on this.

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” God is constantly working, continuously drawing all things toward the intended wholeness – already accomplished in God’s time. The problem is the last bit of the sentence... “Do you not perceive it?” The Israelites were longingly thinking back to what God had already done for them. They were remembering God’s pivotal saving action in their lives – the Exodus – and were thinking that, because God had acted that way in the past, that was the way in which God would act in the present. God had rescued them “with the strength of his arm” from an unequal, unjust society. God had personally accompanied them on their journey to the Promised Land, into his way of ordering a society of equality and justice. That’s what they wanted and expected from God again...rescue from the Babylonians, deliverance in a new Exodus into the Promised Land once more. What they got

was a non-Jewish, non-God-fearing king of the Persians who conquered the Babylonians and told them they could go back to their land, if they wanted to, and begin the hard life of rebuilding the ruins. A move like that from God was definitely not on their radar. Can you perceive it?

God's move in giving us Jesus of Nazareth was definitely not on the radar either. The people had been expecting a powerful king to come to their rescue – powerful according to the world's idea of powerful, that is, with horses and soldiers, delivering them out of the hands of their current oppressors – the Romans – with the human strength of his arm. Jesus, who revealed God's kingdom with acts of love, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and inclusivity, was not what they were expecting. Today we witness this king being anointed, not on his head like the other kings of Israel and Judah, but on his feet. And today we see this king being anointed, not by a high priest like every other king of Israel and Judah, but by a woman. Jesus' identity as Messiah, rescuer, king of the Jews, will not fit neatly into their preconceived expectations. God is doing something new. Can you not perceive it?

"I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Order where there is chaos and questioning. The source of life where there is death. This is not lost on John, our Gospel writer today. He very deliberately sets his story in the home of Lazarus whom Jesus brought back to life after being dead for four days. Lazarus is reclining with Jesus; Martha is serving – activities identifying them as disciples of Jesus. Then Mary is mentioned. She is at the feet of Jesus, anointing them with nard – a very costly perfume. This action identifies her as a disciple as well. How so? On the night of the last supper with his disciples, Jesus teaches them the love

commandment. He kneels at the feet of his disciples and shows them how much he loves them by humbly serving them. He washes their feet and tells them: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35). Mary knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She fulfils Jesus’ love commandment before he even teaches it. Mary demonstrates a connectedness with Jesus that the other disciples do not yet have, although Jesus explains at length that it is something they – and we – are to strive to attain: be one with each other and with me as the Father and I are one, he tells them. We are the branches. He is the vine. It is this oneness with Jesus that allows Mary to be prompted by the Holy Spirit, moved to bath his feet in an abundance of perfume. Her action may have had greater meaning than even she realized at the time. It is Jesus who provides the explanation for what she has done: “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial,” he says. He connects her loving act with his imminent death. I am doing something new among you. Can you not perceive it?

Jesus takes up her action and makes it a part of his mission. “Our actions, too, may be taken up into God’s purposes and so be filled with worth and meaning” (Brian Peterson, workingpreacher.org). To be prompted by the Holy Spirit, to discern how our words and actions fit into God’s purpose, we must be connected, be one with each other and with Jesus as he is one with the Father, through worship and prayer, fellowship and scripture study, and works of generosity and compassion in the world as the body of Christ. The other disciples – Judas in particular – show us that they do not have this connection, they are taken aback, and Judas openly criticizes, this new and different act of devotion.

Judas is horrified by what he perceives as a waste of a very large amount of money. It could have been given to the poor, he points out, although John lets us know that he would have rather pocketed some of that himself. “We can understand the economic and charitable logic beneath Judas’ criticism but we should also recognize that it resembles a rigorous, unyielding piety that cannot stomach a wild love like Mary’s” (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org). Acts of abundant grace and love regularly get shot down as outside the norm.

My first experience with happened in my home church in South Porcupine. It was a case of young, energetic passion colliding head on with the older, “we don’t do it that way, my dear” frame of mind. I had approached our priest with the idea of providing a free breakfast once a month for the homeless people and struggling families that were becoming more visible in our small community. I proposed a before church breakfast in the church basement so that parishioners could help out and attend. The visitors could join us for worship if they wanted to but it wasn’t expected. My priest thought it was a great idea and asked me to present it at the next Advisory Board meeting. So I did. And when I finished my excited explanation of what I’d like us to do and why we should do it, there was silence for a few moments. And then, at the other end of the long table, Sheila spoke up. “Let me get this straight,” she began. “You want us to provide breakfast...a *free* breakfast? To *homeless* people? And we *don’t* ask them to come to church?” Her dislike of the idea was obvious. Sheila was a very dominant figure in the church, a hard worker in the church, with very firm ideas of how things should be run in the church. After some back-and-forth with me trying to sell my idea, Sheila said, “Well, I’ll give it a try but it’s not going to work.” *She’ll* give it a try? My heart sank. With an, “I’m so sorry” look at me, our priest said, “That’s settled then. Sheila will

head this up.” And do you know what happened? Nothing. Nothing happened. Taking risks through generous and compassionate acts with no clear, immediate return for the church was simply not done and, before too many more years had passed, that church was no longer a church.

I’m doing something new among you. Can you not perceive it? We often get stuck in the belief that God will only act in ways that we’ve already known or experienced. We hold onto these limiting expectations, thinking that God can and will only act within a certain framework – our human framework. But, ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts, your ways are not my ways’ (Is.55:8) God tells us. God brings order out of chaos, life out death in ways that we cannot ask or imagine.

What we cannot ask or imagine will seem uncomfortable, perhaps even frightening. Newness requires thinking and being different. It requires letting go. “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.” What we cannot think of, or what we think is impossible, is not impossible for God. It is in embracing this truth that we find our excited hope and joy that keeps us going forward, keeps us working together for God’s purpose. God’s kingdom *will* come on earth as in heaven and we can be a part of it. What newness is springing up among us? Let us perceive it.