

Sermon March 13, 2016 John 12:1-8 Isaiah 43:16-21 "Getting Out of the Ruts"

A friend once emailed me: "Well, Easter is on its way again. I'm doing the usual churchy stuff, attending the Wednesday night Lenten programs, trying to read the Bible some, - the Lenten usual. But I don't expect anything new from all this. Maybe my life-ruts are just too deep for God, or maybe God is too busy with all the other problems of the world, but I just can't seem to be `made new.'"

How many of us could have written similarly? Our life-ruts seem too firmly cut, too deep for much in us or around us to change. Think of all the resolutions we've failed to keep: I'm going to lose weight; I'm going to be kinder; I'm not going to let things bother me so much; I'm going to read the Bible every day; I am going to try to cherish my spouse more. Everyday life happens, though, and we stay in our ruts and don't change much. "New" can seem elusive, hard to come by.

Here's an old story: Once there was a little frog who fell down in a wagon rut in the middle of an old dirt road. The rut had been made years ago, and had been deepened by many wagons that had passed that way. It was so deep that the little frog could not jump out of it. As far as he could see in either direction the sides of the rut were higher than he had ever jumped.

A sparrow came by and saw the frog and said, "You can make it out of that rut, I know you can." But try as he might, the little frog just could not jump that high.

A tortoise came along and said, "There are a lot of good bugs up here for a little frog like you to eat, I know that you can jump out of there and get some if you really try." But try as he might, the little frog just could not jump that high.

Soon a rabbit came by, and said to the frog, "I once saw a frog no bigger than you stuck in that rut and he jumped out, So you must be able to as well." But try as he might, the little frog just could not jump that high.

Later that day the sparrow and the tortoise and the rabbit were talking when the little frog hopped by. "How did you get out?" asked the sparrow.

"I had to," said the frog, "A wagon was coming down the road." (Told for years by lots of folks, origin unknown)

Sometimes it takes a crisis to get us out of life's ruts. An alcoholic hits bottom. A kid on drugs falls apart. A health emergency forces changes. A fire, an earthquake, a flood, a bombing, force us to view our lives in new ways. The bottom line: something must move us to a place where we make changes, even when it comes to our willingness/need to let God make us new.

What does it mean for God to "do a new thing"? In the days of Isaiah 43, the people were very discouraged and feeling quite unsure about God's power as they saw the strength of the threatening super-power (nation) that was overwhelming them. Through Isaiah, God spoke a tremendous promise to the people, first reminding them of another time when a brand-new deed of God had been needed.

"Remember that I am the God who drowned Pharaoh's army after making it possible for my people to walk with dry feet across the parted sea out of slavery. I did something NEW and MARVELOUS then; I can do something new and marvelous now."

As Christians, we point also to another deliverance, God's deliverance of humanity from no hope to every hope through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God brought forth a new deed by doing something no "proper" god would have done: God became vulnerable to us by exposing to us his great love for us for us. It was a new thing, unheard of, inconceivable. And it had as its purpose one intent: to show us how to enter personally into new, joyful, freed-up life and relationship with God.

In today's Gospel lesson, we saw a woman, in John's version Mary the sister of Lazarus, who anointed Jesus' feet. She would not have been a prostitute, unlike the woman in the story from the gospel of Luke (Luke 7:36-50), for she was Lazarus' sister, also the sister of Martha. Martha served Jesus dinner. Let's put the occasion into context. Jesus had just raised their brother, Lazarus, from the dead. This was an action which caused the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, to decide that Jesus must die. "From that day on, they took counsel to put Jesus to death." (John 11:53) Later, in the same chapter as today's lesson, Jesus will announce that the hour of his death has come (12:20-36).

Facing death, Jesus, and apparently his close disciple Judas, who would soon betray him, ate at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Even as they ate, something new was happening, for Mary took a huge step outside of the social convention of her day.

While Martha did her usual part in the kitchen, Mary, never the practical one, anointed Jesus' FEET by letting down her hair and pouring some very high priced ointment all over them.

According to professor, now retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon, nobody anointed feet in those days. "If one had expensive, perfumed oil, other parts of the body were anointed, but not the feet. Feet were not customarily anointed until after death, when a body was being prepared for burial." This means that Mary was treating Jesus, who had just given life to dead Lazarus, as though he were already dead. And Willimon would suggest that in her action, Mary could not have known that her act of extravagance prepared Jesus for the greatest act of extravagance of all - the CROSS. .... (from *Pulpit Resource*)

Judas was appalled at what happened between Mary and Jesus. He was offended by her extravagance, stating that the money she had spent on the oil should have been used in a more appropriate way, to feed the poor. The entire story for today, however, would tell us that **God** was doing something beyond what WE or any other religious group might define as "appropriate." God was being extravagant as Jesus headed toward Jerusalem to give up his own life so that others could and *can* live.

The religious folks of Jesus' day couldn't see the NEW things God was doing through Jesus, but a woman who seemed not only impractical but without propriety WAS able to see and embrace God's new ways. Judas, a man who had walked closely with Jesus during his ministry, couldn't accept what God was doing when it didn't fit within his definition of what God should do. In John's Gospel, those who should have seen never do, and the unexpected ones catch on just fine. The final irony in this story: Just as Judas sanctimoniously criticized Mary's extravagance, he himself ended up being the catalyst for the largest extravagance ever, the pouring out of Jesus' life.

“Do not remember former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing...” (Is. 43:18-9)

Does anybody here this morning really think that God is doing something new today? Are we expecting it? Are we looking for it? Do we even WANT it? We live in a time of great danger for the Christian church. Mainline churches struggle as attendance and participation seem totally optional. Many folks

attend only if they have something better to do on a Sunday morning. People want to be entertained at church these days, and many churches are tempted to give up the idea of “sharing in the suffering” for something more which may seem more palatable. Princeton writer Marsha Witten told of a mailing she received several years ago - during Holy Week - from a congregation trying to get established near her home. The letter read: "Hi, Neighbor! - At last! A new church for those who have given up on church services! Let's face it. Most people aren't active in church these days... Too often, the sermons are boring and don't relate to daily living, many churches seem more interested in your wallet than in you... Well, WE'VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU! Valley Church is a new church designed to meet your needs. At Valley Church you meet new friends... hear positive, practical messages which uplift you each week: How to feel good about yourself; How to overcome depression; How to have a full and successful life; Learning to handle your money without it handling you; How to overcome stress..." .... Not one mention of faith or God, not a hint of commitment or sacrifice or obedience to God or service to others... (Marsha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism*)

If there is no God, or if God no longer lives or cares about us, then we can call our religion a memorial and do with it as we see fit, according to whatever benefits we manage to squeeze out of it. But if God still lives, and if God is GOD, God who made us and who has a claim on us, then we can do no less and no better than to press forward in our search to understand God's ways and God's wishes for our lives. We must keep our eyes and hearts open for the NEW and extravagant thing God is bringing forth today!

We know all too well about life-ruts, where we find ourselves unable to feel hopeful, unable to forgive, afraid of what lies ahead. Life-ruts are whatever keep us from living the abundant life Jesus came to make possible for us. As we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week, may we offer our “ruts” to our Lord. Pour them out to God in prayer, perhaps each morning, offering all the things in our lives and in this world that keep us from really living.

Jesus' life was given so that we may live, in the hope that we will make the choice to share of ourselves extravagantly for the sake of others. The poor will always be with us; Jesus is with us right now. May the presence of *both* prompt us to spend our lives faithfully. By so doing, so sharing, we will find the meaning of our living. By the grace and power of God, nothing will be wasted, and everything will become new. Our ruts will become our testimony as we praise and follow our living, loving Savior!

Let us pray:

Lord, you know how un-new we are inside, how worn out and worn down, how much we need to be changed by this Lenten season and Holy Week as they show us your heart and then Easter promises Christ's hope and promise. Touch us now, make our hearts new, and show us how to truly share in Jesus' Passion and Life. Amen.