

Sermon March 17, 2013 “Pressing Forward” Isaiah 43:16-21 John 12:1-8 Philippians 3:4b-14

Time for Children: The old story of the boy stranded in the second-story bedroom by a fire. The father is outside, yelling for the boy to jump out the window. The boy, afraid and surrounded by smoke, whimpers, “But I can’t see you.” The father responds, “Go and head and jump, boy; I can see you.” There are lots of times in our lives when we can’t see what lies ahead or how to get out of some sort of mess...But God can, and God loves us and will keep us safe in God’s everlasting and stronger-than-anything arms.

My husband told me about an old Western movie he saw years ago in which the leader of the band of self-styled revolutionaries tests their faith in him. The group really did not like this leader, but they agreed to follow him mainly because they were lost in the desert, out of food, running out of water and he supposedly knew which way to go. He agreed to be their leader only if they would agree to follow all his orders without question. In the middle of a hot day the leader said that he wanted to take a shower. He ordered all the men to pour the water from their canteens into a pot. The men did so quite reluctantly and watched as he shot holes in the pot and showered, their precious water sinking into the desert sand. The leader then got back on his horse and rode on, leading them to an oasis a short distance away. “Now”, he said, “I have proven that I can be trusted to know where I am going and that you can be trusted to obey my orders.” And they marched on together to whatever victory they were trying to achieve. Woody said he could never forget the scene of the shower in the desert—the extravagance, the wastefulness, the absurdity; and how similar it is to the lectionary scriptures for this day: God promising water in the wilderness, rivers through the desert; and the imagery of a woman breaking all kinds of social customs to put some very expensive perfume (worth a year’s wages) on Jesus’ feet and then wiping them with her hair.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent we have a question about our relationship with God. “Do I really trust God to know where the next oasis is? Do I really trust God to see me through this crisis in my life? Do I really trust God to give my life meaning and purpose?”

The wilderness and dry land....we know it. At Christmas the scriptures proclaimed that the wilderness and dry land would rejoice. But we have learned not to expect that. We have seen the wilderness in the faces and lives of our children when they have no real hope or faith in God. We have felt the oppressive power of the desert through the systems that keep people poor and shut the doors on opportunity. We have witnessed parched land in the emptiness of our society’s goals as it screams at us to get ahead, to buy more stuff, to build more, to drive the biggest car, to get the newest phone...Press forward into “success.”

But where are we going? I think of the old story Tolstoy told, about a man who never had enough land. He bought more and more and was never satisfied until finally he died. Only then was the plot he had enough.

The Jews in Jesus’ day pressed forward in their desire to defend their religion, so much so that they could not see the new thing that God was bringing forth in Jesus. Somebody once wrote a possible argument between two serious Jews about Jesus. Listen to the struggle of Eleazar and

Benjamin in this imagined dialogue:

Eleazar declared, "I'm telling you, it's just not possible that Jesus is the Messiah! If anything, he's an imposter. No one should be saying and doing the kinds of things he says and does. It's blasphemy. The man should be killed."

Eleazar and his friend, Benjamin, were teachers of the law in the days when Jesus walked this earth in the flesh. They were terribly puzzled by Jesus. Eleazar would have none of Jesus' ministry or teaching. He was convinced that whatever else Jesus was, the verdict was in and he most certainly was NOT the promised Messiah. Benjamin, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. In fact, he didn't know what to think of this carpenter's son from Nazareth.

"Come on, Benjamin," Eleazar said to him one day. "You were there when we caught him going through the grainfields on the Sabbath to feed himself and his disciples. Do you actually believe that the Messiah would break our religious laws? Be serious. He's an imposter, I tell you!"

"And that's not all," Eleazar's voice became louder. "He also healed that man with the withered hand on the Sabbath day. That's work on the Sabbath.... God could not have intended HIM to be Messiah."

Benjamin was silent. He honestly didn't know what to say. Certainly it was true that this Jesus was shattering old religious traditions. But what did that mean? Benjamin just wasn't sure. He had seen him, and something in him spoke deeply to Benjamin's spirit. He just didn't know...

Eleazar persisted. "Did you hear what this Jesus did at Joab's house? A woman, a prostitute, no less, somehow got into the house and washed his feet with her tears and anointed them with terribly expensive ointment. As Joab said, 'If this Jesus really were the Messiah, he would have realized what kind of woman she was and would have thrown her out.' Whoever heard of a Messiah who lets himself be cleansed by sinners? Why, the very idea violates everything we hold dear!"

Benjamin still kept quiet. He knew Eleazar's words were true. This Jesus certainly was upsetting everything they believed. Still, Benjamin found himself unable to condemn Jesus. Eleazar kept up the pressure. "Look at who he associates with...He receives sinners and tax collectors, and even eats with them! Benjamin, you know as well as I do that table fellowship is sacred. You only eat with those with whom you have deep ties of friendship. I say: 'If that Jesus fellow eats with sinners, then he IS a sinner.' I challenge you to find one word in scripture suggesting that our long-awaited Messiah is to be in fellowship with sinners. The truth is that the Messiah will come for the faithful, for the law-abiding, for those who have held fast to the traditions of the past."

Finally, Benjamin spoke. He said one word: "Isaiah."

"What do you mean, Isaiah?" Eleazar shot back.

"Perhaps it is as Isaiah wrote," Benjamin said, "'Do not remember former things, or consider the things of old. For I am about to do a new thing..." (Source uncertain)

Two thousand plus years later, as we hear the scriptures telling us how the religious authorities became determined to kill Jesus because he was so offensive to them, and as we read of Jesus' friend Mary essentially anointing him for burial the week before he died, what are we to do with it? We know the story. Every year we follow Jesus to Jerusalem and wave our palms and hear how the same people who cheered Jesus and declared him their Savior one day did a 180 degree turnaround the same week and demanded his crucifixion when he didn't become the kind of powerful king they wanted. Okay, so people are fickle. When we don't get what we want, we get angry and afraid and do bad things. But Easter assures us that God was and is bigger than human fickleness and failure, and that Jesus rose again, so what's the big deal? What is supposed to happen to us now, in 2013, to make anything different??

I guess if the apostle Paul were here today, he'd probably stand up right now and say, "Wait a minute! You think you have the answers just because you know the story and how things turned out? You don't! I used to think I understood everything that God was doing. I was a gifted student of Judaism and I was smart and articulate and dedicated and had the best connections. But when the risen Lord Jesus challenged me on the Road to Damascus, I found out that I knew nothing. Everything I had was nothing next to the new thing God was doing in my life right then! He made me new! He entered my heart in a new way and nothing was ever the same again. That's what it's all about: the same God who delivered God's people out of slavery in Egypt and who through Jesus gave up everything on the Cross; this same God is working in your wildernesses and your dry lands and your hopeless places right now!! Don't press forward into the tangles and temptations of this world; instead, press forward into the Lord. All you have to do is listen for YOUR call in Christ Jesus! You will discover in your own life the NEW thing God is bringing forth."

The Gospel of Luke tells a story similar to the Gospel lesson we heard today, except that in Luke the woman who pours the expensive ointment over Jesus' feet is a prostitute. Today's lesson from John tells us that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, all of whom were friends of Jesus, broke open the ointment and anointed him. It will help us to put the occasion into context. Jesus had just raised the brother, Lazarus, from the dead; 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).

According to professor, preacher, and 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 suggests that in her extravagant action, Mary prepared Jesus for the greatest act of extravagance ever - his life given up for our sake on the CROSS. (Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*)

"Do not remember former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing..."

"I am about to do a new thing..." Are we willing to let God do a new thing, something beyond

our ideas or expectations or levels of comfort? Do we trust that God knows best? Are those “Everlasting Arms” trustworthy to lead us and catch us?

If there is no God, or if God no longer lives, then we can safely call our religion a nice memory and do with it as we see fit, according to whatever benefits we manage to eek out of it. But if God still lives, and if God is GOD, then we had better watch out and press forward in our search to know God's ways and God's wishes for our lives. We must keep our eyes and hearts open for whatever NEW God is bringing forth today!

So here we are, in church one week before Palm Sunday ushers us into the drama of Holy Week. We have a choice. We can tell ourselves that we already know the story, that we know that Jesus suffers and dies but that it all ends well with Easter, so it's really no big deal, nothing new. OR we can ask God to open our hearts and our eyes to what God would like for us to see, feel, hear and do today as God works in our lives to bring forth something new in us.

For me, I want to press forward for the new. I know the old story, and I can see lots of things in my life and this world that I don't think I have the power to change. But I stand with the old preacher who prayed one Sunday: ‘Dear God, please do something for us today that isn't in the bulletin . . .’

Look around Winsted. See what appears to be hopeless, life-defeating, dried-up. Look into the eyes of the people around you. Dare to believe that God can do something new for, with, and through them. Look into your own reactions and expectations, your own heart, and press forward with this offer to God: “Dear God, please show me how to do something new for you today.”

May it be so. Amen.