

This message was prepared for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the fifth Sunday of Lent in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. Presented here are the lectionary texts for the day:

Isaiah 43:16-21

43:16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

43:17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

43:18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

43:19 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.

43:20 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,

43:21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Psalm 126

126:1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

126:2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

126:3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

126:4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

126:5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

126:6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Philippians 3:4b-14

3:4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

3:5 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;

3:6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

3:7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

3:8 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

3:9 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.

3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,

3:11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

3:12 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.

3:13 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,

3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

12:3 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.

12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

12:6 (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.)

12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Our bible story for today braids together three dramas of love and jealousy, power and curiosity, deliverance and sacrifice.

The Passover is near.

While you might mark time with the beginning of each school year or the date of your birth

or the anniversary of your baptism,

the narrator of Jesus' story in the Gospel of John marks the years of Jesus' ministry with the celebration of the Passover.

Because the writer of John mentions 3 different Passover celebrations we assume Jesus' earthly ministry lasted 3 years.

The Passover is the epic story of God's deliverance of the Jewish people from the oppression of slavery in Egypt.

It is so named because the Jews were instructed to kill a lamb and spread its blood over the doorposts of their homes.

And when the angel of death visited Egypt,
the angel passed over any home marked with the blood of the lamb,
but those homes that were not marked suffered the great loss of their firstborn child.
From Pharaoh to servant,
from palace to pasture,
the first born of families
and the firstborn of animals was slain.

Why does the writer of this Gospel braid this story into Jesus's story?

Remember that it is from this Gospel that we hear John the Baptist say of Jesus,
"Behold! The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world."

And it is from this Gospel that the Roman Governor Pilot sentences Jesus to death at noon on the day of preparation for the Passover.

The second story is like the first in that it too is a deliverance story.

Jesus delivered his friend Lazarus from death.

Though Lazarus had been in the grave 4 days, Jesus stood outside the tomb of his friend,
and he ordered the stone to be rolled away
and standing at the entrance of death, Jesus great and grieving anger welled up and he wept and cried out
"Lazarus! Come forth!"

The power of resurrection life went from the Word of the LORD
and into the body of Lazarus and he stood up and walked out of death and into life.

And so it is that a celebration dinner was in order.

Some were there to give thanks.

And some were there to gawk;

to catch a glimpse of Lazarus, curious as we might be, with one who has come back from the dead.

So fascinated with Lazarus in fact, they seem to be oblivious to the third strand of the story.

In the third strand of the braid, all else drops into the background.

It is likely that no one thought much of Mary taking her place at the feet of Jesus,
for this was her preferred seat at the table.

When she broke open the perfume, it at once filled the room.

When it poured over Jesus' feet it surely touched his callouses

and dripped down through his toes

and into the carpet upon which he sat.

And then in an intimate act of love,

like a braid undone,

all comes together—deliverance, resurrection, thanksgiving.

The fullness of Mary's hair now like a bath towel,

swabbing the oil into the feet of Jesus.

It seems that Mary saw it coming—Jesus' death, that is.

Perhaps she heard it in his words;

perhaps she saw it in his eyes,

in his shoulders,

in his mood.

And so we are told that she spent a year's wages that she might prepare him for his burial; that she might demonstrate in a tangible way the extravagance of a love without measure, lavish and exceedingly abundant, above all we could ask or imagine.

In the film *Babette's Feast*, the story is told of a refugee from France's civil war of 1871. The refugee's husband and son had been killed and her own life threatened. She was sent by a friend to live in an austere village on the coastline of Denmark. Luxury was not a part of the existence of those who lived in the thatched roofed houses of the village. The two sisters who took Babette into their home lived ever so simply and spent their days in feeding the hungry and knitting clothes for their shivering coastline neighbors.

They were the daughters of a preacher who had taught God's love and that "Mercy and Truth have met; Righteousness and Bliss shall kiss one other."

Yet, after his passing, his followers became increasingly snippy with one another; forgetting the best of the community; and like their bland food and stark physical existence, they thought only of the dull and flavorless acts of one another.

The 100th birthday of the preacher was coming near. So his daughters planned a very simple celebration to honor his memory.

Now it came to pass that about that same time, Babette won a French lottery which paid out 10,000 francs. Babette asked if she might prepare a special meal for the birthday celebration. At first the sisters protested, but Babette, who had been in the service of the women for well over 14 years, said, "In all the years I have cooked for you and served you, have I ever asked you for anything?"

The sisters relented and Babette returned to France to order what was needed for the celebration. The items that arrived on the shoreline included live quails and a sea turtle and fruits—dried and fresh; and linens and china and goblets and silver. There were cases of the best wines and champagnes; oils and vinegars and cheese.

When the sisters saw the wines and fine foods, they literally had nightmares about hell and were quite sure that they had put the souls of their community in eternal danger. They confessed their dilemma to their church members, who said they would eat because the promise had been made to Babette, but they would surely not enjoy, nor comment on the food or drink.

Ahh, but something happened as they ate and drank. Though they did not praise even one sip or speak of word about one morsel, as they feasted, their snippiness turned to kindness and their greed to gracious humor. After the feast they gathered around the village well and hand in hand sang of God's abiding love.

The sisters themselves thanked Babette for this last meal for they assumed that now that she was wealthy, she would return to France. But to their surprise, she said all of her money was gone. Gone! How could this be?

Babette explained that she had given all she had, all 10,000 francs for the gift of that single loving feast.

Like Judas,
we live in a world of snippy greed and bland imagination.
We assume there is never quite enough grace
or laughter
or hope
or cash
or justice
or tenderness
or food
or help
or ointment
or lamb
or quails
or turtles
or oils
or kindness to go around.
It is odd, isn't it?

God's story has always been a story of abundance, of generosity, of lavish grace and unsparing love.

We have received from God's speech bountiful creation;
We have received from God's heart plentiful devotion;
We have received from God's hands and feet and side and head extravagant sacrificial love.

God bends down to you with braids of beauty, strength and honor.
God anoints you for your death that you may be raised to new life.
God sets a table before you with an artistic feast of love fit for the angels, but given to you.
To you and to all who will taste and Give Thanks!

Now may our God of extravagant love
Anoint you in tenderness
Raise you up in holiness
And feast with you in
Honor, generosity, beauty and peace
Now and for 10,000 meals of grace.

I commend to you this film:

https://www.amazon.com/Babettes-English-Subtitled-Stephane-Audran/dp/B00A5IXCHA/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1KEHVPMPH04L6&keywords=babettes+feast&qid=1554595906&s=g