

Scripture Readings and Sermon

April 3, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 43:16-21

Isaiah 43 continues the theme of this section of Isaiah which began in chapter 35. Reading this as a second book, chapters 36-39 flashback to the fall of Jerusalem by quoting 2 Kings 18-20. The theme of this second book is not judgment but rather redemption. Compared to the judgment for past rebellion against the covenant, God is doing something new in the restoration of the people. This second book uses the image of a dry and rocky desert to describe the people who have wandered astray for God's will. God, however, is making a straight highway where no one is lost and where the desert bursts forth with water. Repeatedly in different ways, Isaiah proclaims that God will do a new thing for the days of judgment will end. This promise of the exile ending gave hope not only to the people who witnessed their beloved city Jerusalem conquered but to all who as John would say "walk in darkness". It is in this context of something new that Isaiah foretells the coming of the suffering servant who will lead the people on this new way. At Nazareth, Jesus will proclaim that this is being fulfilled in him and he will be the Way, the straight highway to lead all who are lost home.

Isaiah 43:19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Do you remember a time of impending change in your life?

How did you feel? Nervous, afraid, excited, hopeful?

How do you handle change especially when you see it coming?

Where do you find strength during these times of transitions?

Can you perceive the new thing God is doing or are you focused on the loss of the old?

Who was there for you then or who needs you now?

Commentary on John 12:1-8

There are a number of characters to focus on in this story. The story takes place in the home of Lazarus. In John's Gospel, Lazarus not only foreshadows the resurrection but also is the spark that sets off the plotting of the chief priests (12:10) leading to his crucifixion. Mary and Martha, who first appear in John at Lazarus' resurrection, are also present. In Luke's story of Mary and Martha (10:38-41), the focus is on Martha's complaint about how she was doing all the work serving. In John, Martha is mentioned serving but the focus is on what Mary is doing at his feet. Mary is not just listening to Jesus but is anointing him with funeral oil foreshadowing the fact that they would have no time after his death to prepare the body because of the Sabbath. The final character is Judas. For the synoptic gospels, Judas began to betray Jesus when they entered Jerusalem and in Matthew will eventually hang himself because of that betrayal. For John, however, Judas is named as "a devil" after the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee. (John 6:70-71) It is in this passage that John reveals what motivates Judas leading to his betrayal Jesus. Ultimately, according to John, Judas loved money more than God for he was "a thief". Together, all of these characters set the stage for the beginning of Holy Week.

John 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

How would you feel if you saw someone wiping a person's feet with their hair?

What if they were people you knew or were with?

Would you be embarrassed at such an intimate gesture?

What if you knew the person was about to die?

Are we as perceptive as Mary or do we get caught up in "proper" behavior?

Maybe it is not about the money be more about the shame Judas felt?

Commentary on Philippians 3:4b-14

Immediately before this passage, Paul warns the Philippians to beware of "evil worker" or those who would mislead them. Who these evil workers might be can be gleaned from this passage. These workers have obviously used their Jewish piety as their credential for leading the people. Paul's response is to provide his own impressive resume. The workers have also most likely been preaching that being a pious Jew is essential to being a good Christian. Paul responds by saying that he views all his piety as "loss" or "rubbish". Paul argues that it is not our righteousness but the righteousness of Christ that saves us which can only come through faith. Finally, these workers have probably argued that through their pious righteousness, they have achieved salvation. Paul, however, responds that faith is not a one time achievement but something one has to cling to everyday as they "press on" in their daily life in Christ.

Philippians 3:12 I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

What motivates you?

Where do you find the strength to press on even during difficult times?

Do you press on for better days, better money, or to achieve some prize?

Do you press on because Jesus is always walking forward and you need to keep up?

What if we stopped thinking of ourselves as individuals and started thinking of ourselves as part of Jesus' family?

When the family packs up to leave, do you go or do you let them drive off without you?

Reflection on Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8, 2 Philippians 3:4b-14

Sermon "Paradigm Shift"

Like the story in Luke, the scene described in John has Martha serving and Mary at Jesus' feet. In John, however, it is not Martha that is complaining but Judas. While Martha says that was concerned about Mary wasting her time, Judas says that Mary is wasting money by anointing Jesus with precious oil. John indicates that Judas is not concerned with money for the poor but rather money for himself. Jesus response to Judas is very similar to his response to Martha. To Martha, Jesus says that she needs to reassess her priorities. Work and chores will always be there but Mary, by choosing to focus on Jesus while he is there, has chosen the one thing necessary. Jesus responds to Judas by saying that the poor will always be with us but Jesus will only be with them for a short time longer. Judas needs to shift his priorities before his priorities lead him down a path of destruction.

What Judas needs is a paradigm shift in thinking. A paradigm shift is defined as a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions. Jesus is calling Judas to stop thinking in worldly terms and start thinking in spiritual terms. In order to make this shift, an individual must be willing to let go of all their past assumptions. This is what God was telling the Israelites to do in Isaiah. They needed to forget the old deliverance story of Exodus and the Red Sea and prepare themselves for a "new" story of deliverance through the desert. They must leave behind the the old so that they can listen for what God is doing now.

Confronted with Jewish converts to Christianity that were telling the church in Philippi to take up Jewish traditions, Paul responds by urging the Philippians to leave the old ways behind. Using himself as an example, Paul argues that in Christ we are made new. Nothing in the past can produce righteousness. It is only by letting go of our old need to control that we can fully trust in Christ. Therefore, leaving behind the past, we must strive to follow Christ into a new future.