

I've been fascinated by the fog we've had in the past few weeks, and I took a picture of it looking down on it. We enjoy a spectacular view of the Cascade Mountains and Possession Sound from our deck. My photo of the fog was taken on a day when the sun was shining brightly up on the hill where our home is, but there was a thick blanket of fog covering the ocean below. The picture is aimed at the ferry landing in Clinton, which is invisible because of the fog – all you see are vague outlines of trees on this side of the Sound, and Mukilteo on the other side, with a cloud in between. The really odd thing was standing in bright sunshine while hearing the fog horns blowing for all they were worth. I suddenly perceived the fog and foghorn as metaphors: as if I was on the ferry, the fog became the metaphor of a barrier in my relationship with God and the fog horn represented a prophetic voice calling me back, guiding me back to God. I don't know what your particular fog is, the place where you can't see clearly that becomes a barrier in your relationship with God, but I can tell you what one of mine is. Distractedness – activities run wild, out of control noise, uncontrolled access to media, too much coming into my mind – so that I am over stimulated and over functioning. I'm so overfed, so stuffed with distractions, there's hardly any quiet space. That may not be your fog, but I'm pretty sure the distractions so prevalent in today's culture are widespread spiritual issues for individuals and the church that result in lack of focus, getting stuck, or stalling out.

I'm not saying we are unloved by God if we're in a fog we can't see through. We're not saved by our ability to see clearly – our conscious understanding – nor are we condemned by poor spiritual eyesight. But the inability to see through whatever our personal and corporate fogs are blocks our responses to God, our ability to participate in life with God, our availability for God to work with us. And yet the fog horn blows telling us to look for the sunshine waiting for us. The prophetic foghorn of Isaiah said as much to us a few moments ago. Did you hear it? God said: **I am about to do a new thing... do you not perceive it?**

No accident that these words come to us the week before Holy Week begins. Not a coincidence at all that today's gospel reading occurs on this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, because the timing of Mary of Bethany's story just before Holy Week is our prophetic fog horn announcing the beginning of a new thing God is about to do. I want us to **perceive** Mary of Bethany as a prophet of this new thing. Perceiving this will involve our senses more than our analytical brains. This is a sensual story about Mary of Bethany. Sensual is not the same as sexual as accounts in the Bible about women are so often misinterpreted. For the next few minutes I want to invite you to put away all the things that keep you from being completely present in this moment so we can perceive this new thing. It's important. Jesus is here. We need to pay attention. God is about to do a new thing. I want us all to see it.

There will be a dinner party next Saturday night. It's the dinner given for Jesus in today's gospel, and even though we know it happened a long time ago, and no matter how many times we've heard this story, I want to persuade you that this dinner party is actually going to happen for us in the future, because I need another chance at perceiving the new thing God is about to do. Maybe you do too. Our presence at this future dinner party will mark the beginning of our participation in Holy Week. By the Jewish clock the Sabbath ends at sundown on Saturday, so the next day begins at sundown. By sundown next Saturday we'll actually be into Palm Sunday.

But sometime before next Saturday, sometime this week, Mary of Bethany will witness Jesus raising her brother Lazarus from the dead – the wondrous sign that revealed Jesus as the resurrection and the life. So Mary of Bethany will come to this dinner party next Saturday night having just seen her brother who had been dead long enough to stink brought back to life. No doubt her understanding will be limited of what she has just seen. She won't know what we know, that Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead is a mountain sized billboard of a sign announcing the new thing God is about to do to reverse everything. She won't know this, but we can safely guess she will come next Saturday night with a heart overflowing with thanksgiving. We would feel the same way if we saw someone we love restored from a life so stinky we hadn't been able to come near them. We'd feel the same way if we saw a tragedy rectified, or hopeless suffering redeemed. She will come with unspeakable joy for the new life she sees with her own eyes in her brother Lazarus. She will bring feelings too deep for words but she will bring a need for expression so powerful that she loses any sense of self-consciousness. She must act, she is compelled to act. She will become more than a witness who has seen a wondrous sign. She will become an active participant who will herself perform a sign, another big billboard of a sign that shouts who Jesus is. Another sign that will create faith in those who perceive it. She will perform a sign that will be told and retold throughout the world – the sign of anointing Jesus.

By way of reminder what you already know: Contrary to secular belief Jesus' last name is not Christ, rather it is his title. Christ, Christos is Greek for anointed one. The Hebrew word for Christos is Messiah. Old Testament kings were anointed by prophets or priests. But God is about to do a new thing. For the anointing of this king, rather than a recognized member of the establishment, God will use a woman, an ordinary person without lofty status. Mary of Bethany will be the human agent who anoints the Messiah – and that is a very big deal. Will you see it?

Old Testament kings were anointed on their heads. Mary will do the opposite. We will find Mary of Bethany at Jesus' feet, the only place, the only position she is seen in the Bible is at Jesus' feet. In a previous dinner party, when her sister Martha complains from the kitchen that Mary isn't helping do the work, Jesus says Mary has chosen the better dish, the better position for being fed – in the humble place at Jesus' feet. The only other place in scripture we see Mary of Bethany is when she falls at Jesus' feet in grief that her brother Lazarus is dead. That position of literally being as low in despair and need as a human being can get caused Jesus to weep – the only record of Jesus weeping to express the human response to grief.

We know Mary of Bethany only at Jesus' feet, and it is this position that will qualify her to anoint Jesus. Reversing the status of institutionally recognized prophet or priest, her lowly position at Jesus' feet creates another new thing: Mary of Bethany will personify the appropriate position of disciples of Jesus, the position of worship. Can you see it?

Old Testament kings were anointed to set them apart as sacred for their mission as leaders. Mary will anoint this Messiah for his burial. Instead of the oil typically used to anoint kings, Mary will use 12 ounces – the Roman pound – of pure nard, a powerful perfume that in today's prices would cost more than \$12,000. The purpose of pure nard as a burial ointment was to overcome the stench of death. This anointing announces this Messiah's sacred mission as death itself. Jesus will be anointed for his mission to die on behalf of others, and the fragrance of that pure nard will fill the whole house of God's people. The beautiful fragrance of the mission for which Jesus will be anointed will overcome the terrible smell of our own sinfulness. Powerful smells often lodge deep in our memories. Maybe our smell memory can overrule our insecurities in

pledge of this Messiah's mission to overcome the stench of our death. Is this anointing fragrance strong enough? Can you smell this promise?

There is one more detail in this anointing that will show God's doing an unexpected thing. Instead of using the towel of a servant to dry Jesus' feet, Mary of Bethany will wipe his feet with her hair, a tangible part of herself. I have heard this interpreted as a scandalous thing to do – Mary's letting down her hair before anyone other than a husband. This may be one of those sexualized misinterpretations. But the Apostle Paul taught that a woman's long hair was her glory and her covering in Christ. Of course Mary of Bethany won't know Paul's teaching next Saturday evening. She will use what she has, the part of herself that covers her head. She will use her glory, the best of herself as self-offering. Her hair will become perfumed with the embalming nard, and will connect her directly and far more intimately to Jesus' coming death than a servant's towel. This anointing will be an act of self-sacrificial extravagant worship. Worship appears inappropriate and extravagant to those who cannot perceive it with the eyes of faith. Judas is the dinner guest who will remind us why we sometimes don't perceive what worship is. Judas is the guest who will remind us why we are sometimes not able to worship.

So Mary will anoint Jesus' feet, the humble part of the body closest to the earth, the part of Jesus' body that walks the earth in order to touch humanity. This humble Messiah whose feet will be anointed instead of his head will ride into the city of Israel's kings a few hours later, not in conquest on a pure bred stallion, but on a donkey instead, another sign of the new thing of reversals and opposites.

Will Mary of Bethany perceive her prophetic role in the new thing God is doing? Will she understand any of this about why her anointing of Jesus is so significant? I doubt it. Her eyes of faith at the time will not yet be completely healed and whole, anymore than our eyes of faith are in this life. Like Mary of Bethany, we too see through a glass dimly. But many of us could see better than we do. We could see more clearly than we do if we would respond to the foghorns that help guide us out of the fog. For my particular fog of distractedness, I'm asking God to help me fast during Holy Week – fast from the distractions that keep me so overfed that I have little appetite for God. To fast from the distractedness that keeps me so over stimulated that there is no quiet place of reflection for Jesus to fit. Perhaps you can think of what you might fast from during Holy Week. Fast so that you will be hungry to see the new thing God is about to do for you and for the Church and for the world. **God is about to do a new thing... will we perceive it?**