

Lent 5, April 7 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church. Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Sometimes a gospel writer's obsession gets in the way of the story they're telling, and today's gospel is an example. I left out the section about Judas' motivations because it's not relevant to the core of this story - and really is more a reflection on John's desire to condemn Judas than to bring out the really significant story he embedded it in; so focus on Mary and the perfume.

We're nearly through Lent! Next week is Palm Sunday – any last thoughts?! This whole set of readings – every single one – has last thoughts, and they're all about the same thing: let it go.

It? The “it” is, in the end, the same in every reading: the past, and what happened there.

There were great things in the past, says Isaiah; God did great things. But if you try and live in those moments forever, you're dooming yourself. Let it go. And there were terrible things in the past, too – like the slavery you were escaping across that Reed Sea. You could – some do – try and live in that past, too; but you'd still be dooming yourself. Let it go; release the past/your past; only then, only when you do that, when you let go, only then will you create the space for the newness that comes from God. “Niagara Falls in Death Valley; spiritual sustenance for you who are spiritually dry, worn out, burned out.

The people the Psalmist wrote to were rather like Isaiah's audience: they remembered and celebrated – and held onto – the great stories of the past, and that ‘holding on’ was getting in the way of their God-promised future. Sure, the Lord had restored the fortunes of Zion. But they needed to let that cherished memory go – archive it – so that they could enter into a new, different, wonderful future.

For the People of God these two passages ask us a question: do you trust God enough to let go of the past before you encounter the future? Do you believe God's future is coming, and that it will be good? You have the past to lean on, can you let it go?

Paul is a living example of someone who trusted God so much he was willing to let go. First, he says, “look at everything I can boast about,” meaning, I'm so lucky, everything is going so well for me in my current identity.” And then, he says this: “it's actually all crap, compared to knowing Christ.” Despite all the struggles, the beatings, the insults, the loss of privilege, Paul was able to see past all those seemingly great things and let them go, let his past go, let it go and, instead, to press on, to keep his eyes on the prize that is God's gift and call to him – and to each of us and all of us. All those things you think are really important – wealth, status, position – you have to let it go.

Both last week and this week, Jesus tells us to “let it go.” In the parable of the Prodigal Father (for it's the father in this story who's really profligate and wasteful, both in the way he gives away half of everything he owns to a son he knows will waste it, and then in the way he lavishes attention, and things, on that son when he returns), in the parable of the Prodigal Father, Jesus says, in the father's words to his elder son, “you've got to let go of your obsession with things,

and their value that has informed your life: let that past go.” And this week, in the story of the use of the phenomenally expensive perfume, he says the same thing to his own disciples: “you’ve got to let go of your obsession with things, and their value that you learned in your past and pasts and be open to a new thing.”

And in each case, the reason for letting it all go is love. Love is a higher value than things – perhaps THE higher value than all things. Human existence is transitory – here today, gone tomorrow. And we never know just how transitory: Tim Hendrix – friend to many of us and husband to JR – was 45 years old.

Who cares if the Prodigal Father wasted more than half of everything he owned on a son he undoubtedly knew would burn through it faster than the speed of light. His love was priceless.

Who cares if Mary’s perfume was worth a fortune that could have fed many! Her love was priceless.

Let go of the past. Let go of your expectations, and hopes – fulfilled and unfulfilled. Let go of the expectations of others for you. Those perspectives are so easily warped, and will warp you.

In the end, isn’t that a great part of what Lent is about? Letting go of the good, and the bad, and the ugly that is the past and in the past, and making room for newness – grace – to happen? Isn’t that what the notes in the bowl are about? Letting go of the past and making room for newness?

Trust in God, and all will be well, even if it seems like its not. In the swift and varied changes of the world, let your heart be fixed where – you know this – where true joys are to be found: with God, and those who follow God. Peace be with you. Amen.