

Lent 5, March 13, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

And so we come to the threshold. Holy Week is just a week away – the central most sacred time of our sacred cycle of remembrances.

The readings invite contrasts – two different ways of living held up against each other. And they're not just minor differences; they're radically different.

And they're all about us – about us and our future as human beings and people of faith.

Isaiah says that with God you should expect the unexpected! This is radical, revolutionary change, not incremental, or creeping so slowly that you don't really notice it. Perhaps a better translation of the core of this passage is: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth: **how can you not** perceive it?" Think, for a minute: rivers of water where all was desert? Really? You don't exactly see that every day!

Paul energetically proclaims that those things the world values are, for him worthless, "crap," compared to the transformational experience of knowing Christ.

This is "world-turned-upside-down" stuff! Seen with new eyes, heard with new ears!

So what about the gospel – what's to "upside-down" about that?

Well, first, the "expensive perfume," the "pure nard:" Nardostachys jatamansi (Nard-O-stA-kis Jata-manC) is a flowering plant from the honeysuckle family which grows in northern India and Nepal, in the eastern foothills of the Himalayas. It was – and is – a major component of a type of intensely aromatic amber-colored essential oil called spikenard which was the main ingredient of the perfume called, in Latin, *nardinum*. It was a luxury item in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Middle East, and in Jewish tradition it was the main part of the consecrated incense used in the Temple for incense offerings. The tradition required that the ingredients for the incense offering were contributed by the congregation – it was, in other words, a communal incense offering. (Exodus 25:1, 2, 6; 35:4, 5, 8, 27-29)

Mary used a pint of Nardinium - worth about \$25,000 in today's money - to anoint Jesus. John doesn't want to be kind to Judas, so he places his own interpretation on Judas' words – in reality, I think most of us would balk at using \$25,000 to anoint someone's feet rather than using it for the benefit of others. BUT if we think of the action based on the value of the nard, we're missing the point!

Anointing with incense oil is a time-honored way of identifying royalty – Samuel anointed Saul and, later, David, as The Way of identifying them as the first and second kings of Israel. And the word "Messiah" means "The Anointed One." Religious figures always "crown" royalty – the Archbishop of Canterbury will anoint/crown the next King of the United Kingdom. If you look more carefully, though, it's always religious MEN who anoint kings.

And – in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century – it was taboo for men to be touched by women unless they were relatives. It was also wrong for women to “let their hair down” in front of men. Women were never taught by men – in fact, women were never taught, period, they never spoke to men as equals. Mary does all of these things – she sits at Jesus’ feet as he teaches (typical posture of devotee), she talks with him, she lets her hair down, she touches. She does these things because Jesus invites it, has no problem with it, sees it as perfectly natural. **For Jesus, women are more than sexual objects and children-rearing machines.** Women are quite simply, for Jesus, absolute equals. In the Reign of God women are equal at the intellectual level, at the salary level, at the religious level, at all levels. Mary knows this, so she assumes her right to approach Jesus and express her love, and when a male (Judas) objects, Jesus not only confirms her freedom to do so but rebukes the man who would restrict her.

The second “world-turned-upside-down” part of this story has to do with what Mary does with the nard. Anointing was done first over the head. She anoints Jesus’ feet: Mary is putting worldly wealth in its appropriate place: at Jesus’ feet. Symbolically she lets go of any obsession with money, with the things that most of the world values, and lays them at the feet of her Messiah.

Perhaps the most significant thing that Mary is doing is the thing Jesus identifies her as doing: the usual funerary practice of anointing a dead body with pungent herbs to cover the smell of death before the body is buried – except that Jesus is not yet dead!

So the hard part for us in this story is that (if we understand the reference) then the smells of the gospel passage are the simultaneous smells of death and life. I think that makes this text particularly hard; **it says that death and life exist together.** That’s why we have this text on this day – this last Sunday of Lent: **it’s a stark reminder not to kid ourselves.** Death still smells as it does; death will still seep through every crevice no matter how we might try to block it out with the pungent incenses of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century lives – death will still find the smallest crack to invade our assurances that resurrection is true.

Yet for us as people of faith it’s also and simultaneously a reminder that everything changes with Jesus’ resurrection. If Mary’s Nard is a reminder that the smell of death is always with us in some measure, it is also, and more powerfully, a reminder that this particular nard’s rich odor is the sweet smell of abundant love and life, lived in warm embrace of the Resurrected One.

That simultaneous smell offers a profound truth: it’s only when we are willing to smell death that we can smell life.

And that is the power of this story, especially here and now looking forward to the last two weeks of Lent. It holds together Lent and Easter so very tightly that you wonder how you can separate the two -- and the point is - in this upside-down world of God - that that you can’t. One does not exist without the other -- that is the truth of the incarnation. And, that is the very hope of the incarnation, if we are truthful.