

Sermon for Lent 5C
Sunday, March 3, 2022
“Embrace the Unexpected”

Texts: John 12:1-8; Isaiah 43:16-21

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s gospel text, though short, is full of the unexpected. We find Jesus back at the home of his dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. Jesus was their dinner guest, and as was appropriate for any hosts, they showed him utmost hospitality. While at the table, Mary took it upon herself to anoint Jesus’s feet. This was a usual sign of hospitality, because people in those days walked on dusty desert roads. When they arrived at someone’s home, their feet were dirty and probably dry and cracked, so the host would wash their guest’s feet and put soothing oil on it. Mary took out a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, an aromatic oil. Nard was a commonly used substance in the ancient world with many uses from body perfume to a flavoring for food to a fragrance for preparing the dead for burial. This wasn’t the cheap stuff like what you might find at Duane Reade; this was the expensive stuff that you would buy on Fifth Avenue. Such perfume cost 300 denarii, the equivalent of a year’s wages. Judas thought Mary was being wasteful and frivolous using such expensive perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus. It would have been more prudent to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor—like Judas even cared. Now something noteworthy about this scene is the fact that Mary was anointing the feet of Jesus. You see, anointing was something done to priests and kings. Only a man would have done such anointing, but here it was Mary, a woman, who was anointing the feet of the Anointed One. And then she wiped his feet with her hair, which was also unusual. It would have been considered taboo for a woman to touch a man so intimately, unless it was her husband. Mary literally let her hair down for Jesus. It was very intimate; it was very personal. It was a moment of vulnerability. Can you imagine what it must have been like in that room? A quiet dinner among friends, the smell of perfumed nard mixing with the savory aromas of food...and Judas in a corner ticked off at the whole ridiculous thing! Then Jesus gave a bit of foreshadowing of things to come; he scolded Judas for his insincerity and said that the nard would be used for his burial that was soon to come. “Chill out, Judas, and enjoy the moment. There will be plenty of poor people to help after I am gone.”

Nearly every verse of today’s gospel story gives us something unexpected. Mary anointing Jesus with her hair, the use of expensive perfume to anoint his dirty feet, Judas acting as though he cared about the poor, Jesus speaking about his burial. This gospel reminds us that God does his best work through unexpected events by unexpected people. Think about the many people in the Bible who weren’t expected to do the great things they did. Sarah, an old woman who had believed she was barren, bore a son who himself would be the grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses was raised in the household of Pharaoh and had a speech impediment, yet he led the Hebrews out of Egypt to freedom and brought them the Law given to him by God himself. David was the smallest and frailest of his brothers, yet he defeated the giant

Goliath and became one of Israel's greatest kings. Saul, a Jewish fundamentalist who persecuted followers of Jesus even to the point of having them put to death, he seemed like the last person on earth who would believe in Jesus, but then Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and called Saul to spread the gospel. With a new name, the Apostle Paul championed the good news of Jesus Christ all over the Roman world; half of the New Testament contains the stories and writings of St. Paul. Mary, a teenage girl who had never known a man became the God-bearer, giving humanity to the Savior of the world. And, of course, God's most unexpected act was giving the world a Messiah who defied expectation. The people expected a Messiah who would be a defender of the Law; instead they got the One who came to fulfill the Law and open its words to new ways of living it out. The people expected a Messiah who was a warrior like the great kings of old—Saul or David—who would conquer the Romans and restore the great Kingdom of Israel; instead they got a carpenter and who would be tortured and crucified by the Romans. His followers thought the crucifixion was the end of the story, but it was just the beginning.

Experiencing the unexpected usually catches us off guard. How many times in our lives have things turned out differently that we had expected or hoped? How many times have we been disappointed by the way things turned out? Certainly the last two years have been nothing like what we had planned or hoped for. We had to rethink, reimagine, and readjust every aspect of our lives—whom we hung out with, where we went, when we went there, *if* we could even go there. Healthy people getting sick and dying overnight. Businesses that served their communities for many years closing their doors permanently. Having to attend church from the screen of a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Not being able to socialize with friends or family.

But the crisis of a worldwide pandemic notwithstanding, in the course of our lives, we are constantly being faced with the unexpected, but we must not forget that God does his best work in the midst of chaos. Isaiah said, “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Isaiah directed those words to the people of Israel at a time when they were in exile in Babylon, after everything they knew had been lost—their homeland, their temple, their way of life. They were struggling with their very identity, but Isaiah asked them to remember how God worked things out time and time again.

When things aren't going the way we want, hope, or expect, we need to step back and think about how God might be doing a new thing—how God is, indeed, working things out. We need to imagine how God might be challenging us to think about our lives and our situation in a new way. We need to embrace the opportunities that sudden change affords us, often giving us a chance to improve, reorganize, or redesign something that needed changing. We experienced that sort of thing in the church, where we've had to reimagine about how we bring the good news to God's people. We started live streaming and using internet technology in new ways. We held meetings virtually

and remotely, which was inconvenient for some, but for others gave them access to our programs that were previously unavailable because of transportation or time issues. And now, as we slowly return to normal life, we respond and embrace the new thing that God has done; now we are trying to figure out what a hybrid life looks like that includes ways both old and new. I recently read something that I think are helpful words for when we face change and the unexpected. Suppose you had a very precious item of pottery. Maybe it was something made by someone you knew or given by someone dear to you. You cherished that piece of pottery. Suddenly you find yourself looking at it smashed on the floor into several pieces, too many to reassemble. But along comes somebody else with another item of pottery for you, or perhaps you find a replacement, more delicate and more beautiful and more wonderful than the one whose demise you are pondering. No one is saying not to be sad about the first item of pottery, but at the same time, your grief over that original item need not prevent you from seeing this new and glorious gift. That's how God works. In the midst of our disrupted lives, he sends opportunities better than what we had planned.

As we continue living from day to day with all of the ups and down of life, may we not be thrown into despair when life isn't going the way we want. Rather, let us look for how God might be about to do a new thing, how a better piece of pottery might be in transit by UPS. May we discover where God takes us when we embrace the unexpected. Amen.

Resources

David Lose, "The unexpected God" in ...*in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/03/lent-5-c-the-unexpected-god/>

Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, "Commentary on John 12:1-8" in *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2749

Sam Wells, "I am about to do a new thing," https://livingchurch.org/2022/03/11/i-am-about-to-do-a-new-thing/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=1111c20138-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_03_22_09_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0826f52b83-1111c20138-128527886