

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 43:1-21

New Testament lesson – John 12:1-8

### Something Old, Something New

When I visit a church where the pastor has given a title to the sermon, I will usually look at the title and the Scripture lessons to see if I can guess where he or she is headed with the sermon. If you try that with this sermon, you might think I am preaching about wedding traditions, or maybe the format Glenn Miller sometimes used for a musical medley in his programs which you can find on YouTube.

This title would be only half of either one of those. The full phrase would be “Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.” It would be a reasonable guess, but it would be off the mark.

This title has to do with God’s activity among his people, first in our OT lesson and then in our NT lesson. The setting for the OT lesson is the Babylonian captivity, near its end, or perhaps in the days soon after the Babylonian Empire was conquered by King Cyrus of Persia. It was Cyrus who returned the Jewish people to their home in Israel and allowed them a great deal of autonomy there. He also aided them in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

Speaking to his people through the prophet Isaiah, God reminds his people of things from former times. For one thing, he reminds them that it was he, the LORD, who created them. He called them by name and redeemed them. They were captives in Egypt, though that was not how they had gone there to begin with.

Then he reminds them of more from that great story. They passed through waters and through rivers which did not overwhelm them. Moses parted the Red Sea and Joshua parted the Jordan River, so that on both occasions the children of Israel crossed on dry ground.

Another redemption is on its way now. God will gather his scattered people from east and west, and from north and south. They will return home even if they are at the ends of the earth. God will bring forth his people to be his witnesses, even to people who seem blind or

deaf. They will not be able to deny the obvious truth that the LORD is God. No other god was before him and no other god will be after him. The LORD, God of Israel, cannot be stopped once he has determined to accomplish something.

God is the Holy One of Israel, their Redeemer. He will break the mighty kingdom of Babylon, and restore his people to their home. Once more he reminds them that he did this before, when he accomplished their escape from Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. He made a path for his people in the sea, but when the horses and chariots entered, they were destroyed.

But now, says God, forget about that. Don’t consider them. He is going to do something new. This time, he is going to bring them out of their captivity through the wilderness, but even in the desert they will have water. They will have a journey that is safe even from wild beasts.

Why is God bothering to do this? Of all the people who have been conquered in the history of the world, why does God pick out this people to redeem like no other? Why did he form this people for himself? He says here, it was to declare his praise. And for centuries they did so, albeit somewhat inconsistently. And when he sent his Son to live among them, there were many who rejected him. But others treated him with great love and reverence. We see an example of that in our NT lesson.

Our NT lesson is John’s account of the woman who anointed Jesus before his death, using a jar of very expensive nard. There is a similar story in Mark and Matthew, and another in Luke. The story in Mark and Matthew definitely seems very similar, and some scholars think it is the same as this one, told with different details. Others point out the differences and say they are two separate incidents. In the Mark and Matthew version, the woman is not named. She anoints the head of Jesus, not his feet, and she apparently uses all of the nard. She does so in the

house of Simon, a leper, probably one whom Jesus healed. This story in John occurs six days before the Passover, while the one in Mark and Matthew takes place only two days before Passover.

Luke's version does not name the ointment used, and it occurs much earlier in the ministry of Jesus, in the house of a Pharisee.

Because of the timing here and in Mark and Matthew, some people think the woman in Mark and Matthew may also be Mary, coming to Jesus a second time to finish anointing him before his death. It is interesting to note that John mentions this anointing at the beginning of his account of the raising of Lazarus, apparently before she actually anointed him. John seems to want us to know that this is coming, though at that point he only mentions "ointment," without specifying that it is the very expensive nard ointment.

I should probably say something about just how expensive this ointment was. If it has been correctly identified, this nard had its origins in the Himalayas. That's quite a distance. We can understand why it would have been so expensive.

How expensive was it? In all three accounts, its value is given as 300 denarii or more. A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. In comparable terms today, that would be \$15,000 to \$30,000 for a minimum wage worker. That's a lot of money for a jar of ointment. It's no wonder Judas complained about the waste. Of course, John lets the cat out of the bag on that one. Judas had control of the financial resources for Jesus and his followers, and he stole from it.

Jesus' response to the complaint of waste is probably one of the most misused verses of Scripture. Because he said the poor would always be with us, some have used that to mean that it is God's will for some people to be poor. But I think it was really a statement that pronounced judgement on the sinful nature of the human race.

There has never been a time in the history of the world when there were not sufficient resources for everyone to have enough to live on.

One problem has been access to resources, while another problem has been a misunderstanding or disagreement about how resources should be used to alleviate poverty.

People sometimes make mistakes in choosing how they should access resources. I myself have chosen two professions which did not really give me much access to financial resources. I have never been truly poor, but we skirted dangerously close on occasion.

Meanwhile, others make truly bad choices. They slack off in school, they don't work hard at a job, they waste money on gambling, drugs, alcohol, or on more socially acceptable expenditures like boats, vehicles, and vacation homes. People acquire enormous debt, and eventually their world crashes, maybe because of a job loss or some other economic downturn, and they find themselves in poverty.

Sometimes people work hard at the wrong things. You may see a young person who works very hard to stand out in their appearance, with blue hair, shredded jeans, and face tattoos and piercings. They choose a fascinating field of study, such as third world transgender studies. They borrow tens of thousands of dollars for college, and then they complain because their job as a coffee barista doesn't pay enough to cover rent, food, transportation, utilities, and a phone plan in a major city, so they want everyone else to pay off their quarter of a million dollars in college debt.

And then there are people who are poor because they have been dealt a really bad hand in life. There are people with physical and mental disabilities, people whose families have betrayed them in some way that has left them incapacitated, and people who have suffered debilitating trauma, such as some combat veterans. There are people who are poor through no fault of their own.

We have the resources to eliminate poverty, but it is not a simple matter of throwing more money at the poor. We have been doing that in

America since the 1960s in the so-called war on poverty. Poverty seems to be winning the war.

A lot could be done to solve poverty by a combination of education and tough love. The tough love part is rather straightforward. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “if any will not work, neither let him eat.” Pretty simple. No one gets a free lunch if they are able to work and *will* not.

But I think education is the real key to solving poverty. But here, too, it is not a simple matter of throwing money at the problem. The American education system has been proving that for years as well. According to statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, there are only four countries in the world that spend more per student than the U.S. for elementary and secondary education. In post-secondary education, which I suppose includes trade schools as well as college, only Luxembourg spends more per student, and their per capita income is way more than ours. And as everyone is aware, compared to other countries, we really have very little to show for the money we spend on education.

We have the resources to fix education, but we don’t have the will. It would require some major changes, and human nature resists change. That’s why Jesus said the poor would always be with us. Far too few people are willing to make the changes that would eradicate poverty. Instead, we keep trying the same old method, which is to throw money at whatever problem we perceive.

There are times when money can make a big difference. When I taught science, I discovered that the equipment and materials for teaching science were expensive. But without such equipment, teaching science was very abstract, making it difficult to understand. It was also difficult to teach science when I could not do a lab on a rainy day because the roof and ceiling leaked in too many places, as it did in Hamilton before they renovated the science rooms and fixed the roof. Sometimes money does fix a problem.

Too often, however, solving a problem requires a new approach, something that is different from anything that has been tried before. Maybe the problem is that you have a people you have chosen through whom to bless the world, and they are languishing in a foreign land because they did not listen to you years ago. You rescued them once before, but a different situation requires a different approach.

Perhaps people are in need of grace and reconciliation, and the old method seems too limited. You need to branch out and include everyone, not just that nation you brought home from exile several centuries ago.

God does not limit himself to old methods or solutions. God himself does not change, but he adapts his methods to different situations or circumstances. Evangelism and missions programs that worked well in the nineteenth century would probably not be very effective today, even though the gospel is the same.

However, there is one aspect of the Church’s work that does not change. Prayer must always be the foundation for its work. I think that’s one of the reasons why so many mainline efforts at church growth have failed. They think *programs* are the answer, but they neglect serious prayer.

In our NT lesson, Jesus was approaching Jerusalem at Passover time. I think he knew that he would be the new Passover lamb, sacrificed for the redemption of his people, and for the world. In the time of Moses, God had made a path for his people through the parted waters of the Red Sea. In the time of the Babylonian exile, God made provision to redeem his people and return them to their home by means of King Cyrus and a path through the wilderness.

In Jesus, God was going to make a path for all people to come to him, a way for all people to be forgiven of their sins, a method for all people to be redeemed and reconciled to God. This was a completely new approach, and no one saw it coming, not even the disciples who had been warned that this was going to happen. His three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, did not

see it coming. Even Peter, who had protested the idea and had been rebuked by Jesus for being against God – even he did not see this coming.

Did Mary see it coming? Did she know that the man who raised her brother from the dead had power over life and death? Did she know what he meant when he told her sister Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life?” Why *did* she use this very expensive ointment to anoint Jesus at this particular point in time?

It must have been a very aromatic substance, as its fragrance filled the entire house. If they could afford such a jar of ointment, I find it hard to believe that this family was poor. So the house may have been sizable. But it was filled by this fragrance.

As powerful as that fragrance was, I wonder how long it stayed on Mary’s hair. I wonder if she could smell at least a trace of it a week later, when Jesus hung dying on the cross. Certainly if she was the unnamed woman who poured out nard on Jesus’ head only two days before the Passover, she may have gotten some on herself and been able to smell it only a couple days later. There is much here we cannot be sure of.

We can be sure of this, however: Jesus was approaching Jerusalem to carry out God’s new plan. No one expected it. The next day he would enter Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, hailed by the multitude, rebuked by Pharisees. They were all limited in their thinking by the old ideas. But God was not.

What old thinking about God limits you today? We are all guilty of it. I know I am. I have become so used to some things that my thinking and my expectations are limited. I think when I was very new as a Christian I was much more open to God doing new and unexpected things in and through and around me. Now, not so much.

Recently, after some extremely difficult events, my oldest son found himself at the end of

his rope. He realized that he was simply not able to handle the circumstances of his life. So he handed it over to God.

He had accepted Jesus when he was a child, but this time, at his age, he realized he had to be serious about it. I have seen changes in him since then that I can only believe are genuine, the work of God. They are profound, beyond what I can explain or even express.

This happened because he recognized that his old way of doing things, the way he had handled life for many years, was simply not working, in spite of appearances. God has shown him a new way.

What old ways limit you today, in this season of Lent, approaching Palm Sunday next week, followed by Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter?

If I might make one small suggestion for the next two weeks: Maundy Thursday and Good Friday always have a much lower attendance than Easter or even Palm Sunday. But they are actually as important as Easter, and more important than Palm Sunday. Easter without Good Friday and without Maundy Thursday is a miracle without without significance. Going from the hosannas of Palm Sunday to the hallelujahs of the Resurrection is a shallow Christianity.

On Maundy Thursday, and even more on Good Friday, God carries out his new plan for us.

And then beyond the next two weeks, be assured that God will still be actively trying to do new things in our lives. Like the hymn says, morning by morning, new mercies I see. Life as a disciple of Jesus Christ is constantly full of surprises, if we are open to them. God is doing a new thing; now it springs forth, *do you not perceive it?*

If we will pray and pay attention, we will perceive it. Amen.