

## Act of Defiance. John 12: 1-8

Isaiah 43: 16-21.

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?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

The psalm we recited as our Call to Worship this morning begins by remembering the wondrous feeling they experienced when their people, the Israelites who had been taken captive in a foreign land, were returned home. The Babylonian exile lasted 70 years. In those days, that's easily 2 generations. Some only dreamt of the return home, and for those who were fortunate enough to live it, it was still like a dream. Release from the captivity brought them relief; laughter bubbled up and flowed over from their mouths and their hearts rejoiced. Yes, they were fortunate, and the psalmist credits the Lord their God for restoring their fortune: "the Lord has done great things for us."

But it was then. The psalm shifts to the present time and the psalmist finds himself praying to God to restore their fortune once again. What happened, we don't know, but they find themselves in a wilderness, a dry land, asking God to restore their fortune, like the water that courses through a dry stream, *arroyo seco*, or for our imagination, like an April snow after a very dry winter.

Whatever the misfortune that has revisited, perhaps another national crisis or pandemic, they are in a dire situation; laughter is gone, and they are now sowing seed in tears. So, the psalmist prays "may they reap with joy." The psalmist is sure God will turn their circumstance around; "who go out weeping, *shall* come home with shouts of joy." The Psalmist is sure God will rescue them once again.

His trust in God allowed him to channel the deep sorrow into a hope that God will fill them with joy again, transforming his prayer into an act of praise. This is the gift of faith that's offered to us; the faith that trusts in God's faithfulness where the true power is, and that power is God's boundless love. And this is the God we are here to worship, this morning, in our own wilderness.

The Isaiah passage Lou Ann read for us reminds us of another earlier time when God rescued God's people: the story of the exodus from Egypt. At that time, God parted the sea and created the walls of water, so the Israelites fleeing the Egyptian army could cross the sea on the dry path, and then God closed the water upon the Egyptians, utterly extinguishing the forces that threatened God's people.

God made a way where there was no way, turning their circumstance around, restoring their fortune. That's how Isaiah reminded us of who God is, by God's saving act in the past. And yet, in the next line, God says not to remember former things, or consider the things of old, for God is about to do a new thing. God does not want us to live in the memory of past goodness; God does not nostalgia to define our relationship with God; rather, God wants us to pay attention, anticipate and God's action in the world that is "springing forth!"

God says God will make a way in the wilderness where there is no way, but also rivers in the desert. God takes the water that earlier destroyed the Egyptian army and now makes it run through the dry land as rivers, giving life. God is still making a way where there is no way, but saving act of God does not simply repeat.

Just as our lives unfold in unexpected ways, bumping up against unforeseen challenges, God is dynamic in meeting the forces and circumstances that threaten God's creation. God is about to do a new thing in restoring our fortune and it springs forth, but it is not easy for us to perceive it, captive that we are of the way of this world. We are limited in our perception of what could possibly be possible. It is only through the eyes of faith, faith in the faithfulness of God anchored in the Divine Love, that we can endure what feels to us like despair.

Have you ever been in a place in your life where you assessed your situation and said, "there is no way out of this"? It is difficult, almost impossible, for us to see a way when there is no way, let alone make one. All the ways we can think of "making a way" in an overwhelmingly negative situation, are the ways we have seen at work in the past, the way we can imagine and comprehend, and none of them would do in the face of the current crisis, let's say. You're in an uncharted water, in a bad way. In a space like that, we can only freeze or withdraw in despair.

But God is about to do a new thing, because it's an uncharted water, and it springs forth by the power of God's love. If we remember that God is faithful and trustworthy in making a way where we see none, that trust will free us from the paralysis and allow us to channel the

acute energy of grief and hopelessness, even despair, into hope, that God shall make a way even though we cannot see it yet.

Embracing the future in God in the face of difficult present is hard, but that's what God invites us to do, "Do you not perceive it?" God is at work.

There was a woman who perceived it in the moment when the world was closing in on the one whom she loved, Jesus of Nazareth. Hear now in the Gospel of John, how her trust moved her to hope despite hopelessness that surrounded them, and her hope led her to an act of praise, defying the world. John 12: 1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them[a] with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it[b] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Just before this scene, Jesus had raised Lazarus from death, making a way when there was none, glorifying God. Afraid of his influence over people and concerned that he was rocking the boat of their relationship with the Roman authorities, the inner circle of religious leaders was now determined to kill him. Those close to Jesus knew this and that for him to go to Jerusalem for the Passover festival now would be suicidal.

The home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha was near Jerusalem, in the town of Bethany; the name means "the house of the poor." Knowing that Jesus was going to Jerusalem for Passover and the danger it posed to his life, a reasonable thing for them to do might have been to offer to hide Jesus or try to talk him out of going there; that would be to freeze or withdraw in despair.

But they had experienced the resurrecting power of God's Love in Jesus. So, they throw a dinner party for Jesus, instead, spreading the table in the presence of his enemies, an act of defiance, born of hope, born of faith.

Then, Mary did something extraordinary and apparently nonsensical. She brought a copious amount of expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair. Judas, who wanted to appear legitimate because in truth he was not, criticized her action as

unwise; it should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Defending Mary, and interpreting Mary's action, Jesus told her she was preparing for the day of his burial.

If Jesus was right, how heavy Mary's heart must have been. But somehow Mary channeled her grief into an act of love and honor, in defiance of death. And there was something more to her action. She "wiped" Jesus' feet with her hair. The word for "wipe" here is the same word used when Jesus would later "wipe" the disciples' feet, as an act of love for his disciples. Jesus will command them to repeat this act of service for one another.

So, Mary has already done for him what Jesus will do for his disciples. Pouring perfume and wiping with her hair was an act of love. Without grasping what the way forward looked like, Mary was already living into God's future, into the life of discipleship. Mary had perceived the new thing God was about to do.

What else could this action of Mary speak of? When Jesus came to raise Lazarus from death, Jesus was told there would be such stench because Lazarus had been dead for 4 days. Mary's perfume, poured onto Jesus' feet and filling their house, would defy the stench of death. Knowing full well Jesus was walking towards his death in Jerusalem, Mary also trusted God will make a way out of no way; somehow, Jesus' death would not be the end of him.

Though she may not have grasped how exactly, her trust in the divine love so strong as she had experienced in Jesus, gave her hope and prompted to this loving act of defiance, defying any force that would dare to stop the new thing God was about to do, making way to life eternal through death.

So, pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet, an act of anointing only fit for the Messiah, the anointed one, she gave boldly of herself in love to Jesus in her last supper with him, even when her heart was filled with anticipatory grief; and Jesus would give boldly of himself in love on the cross, trusting in the power of resurrection, his ultimate act of trust in God, in defiance of the world that rejected him. Out of his dying and rising, God would make a way out of no way for the whole world.

This is the story of our faith, the gift offered to us that we may trust in the One who makes a way when we don't see one, so we are not kept captive of fear and doubt, our vision limited to what has worked in the past, but channel our fear, doubt and despair into an act of defiance, and live into God's future, in the wilderness of our present world. Thanks be to God.