Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126 Philippians 3:4b-14 John 12:1-8

In the readings for this fifth Sunday in Lent, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah saying, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Paul proclaims for all seekers and believers, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection….” Jesus dines with his close friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus as he prepares for his final journey to Jerusalem, the sight of his impending passion, death and resurrection. During this season of Lent we are called to be open to experiencing the many ways that God is present in our lives today, to be active in living out our baptismal covenant, to fearlessly journey wherever the Spirit leads us.

Sounds just like what St. John’s is about during this interim period, this time between duly called and installed rectors, this season of renewal, reawakening, recommitment.

Our Lenten journey toward Easter is about our encounter with God, our conversation with the true lover of our souls, our ongoing transformation into a community of believers that Jesus is forming as his own, for the reconciliation of the world. This journey builds upon the good, the positive, the holy. We don’t deny what has happened in the past. Rather, we let go of what might distract us.

I think this is what Paul was trying to get at when he wrote to the Philippians. He wanted to remind them of the path he had followed in his younger years and how that no longer was his focus because something new had taken place. Jesus had claimed Paul as his own. It was not something Paul had sought. It was not something Paul had earned. It was not even something that Paul had conceived of as being possible. But it happened and it changed his life forever.

Being claimed by Christ did not devalue Paul’s life as a Pharisee, but put it in a very new context. What Paul had once seen as the basis for righteousness before God, keeping the law, was now viewed as insufficient, in light of his encounter with Jesus. Paul had been blind to the truth about Jesus until that fateful day on the road to Damascus. Then Paul discovered that the truth was not just something intellectual, it was a deeper knowledge that was forged by identifying with Jesus in his heart and his soul. It was a knowledge that developed through experiences, both physical and spiritual. It was a knowledge that transformed Paul into the likeness of the one whom he sought…“…that I may gain Christ and be found with him.” as he wrote to the Philippians.

Today’s Gospel provides us with some additional insights as to how we might gain Christ and be found with him. The Gospel began, “Six days before the Passover…” This was not just any Passover, but that unique moment in Jesus’ life when he prepared to pass over from death into new life, bringing with him all who believed in him – all who identified with him – all who had been claimed by him. It is in this context, six days before this most important of Passovers, that Jesus came to the home of Lazarus, the one whom he had raised from the dead. That sign, the bringing back to life of one who was rotting in the tomb, was a sign of hope - hope in the midst of growing apprehension over what Jesus had predicted…that he would go to Jerusalem and there be tortured and killed and raised to new life by the Father.

This gathering for dinner with intimate friends was a foretaste not just of the coming Passover meal, but also of that heavenly banquet where all would gather with Jesus, the Passover Lamb, around the throne of God. Likewise, this time of transition that we are experiencing here at St. John’s, while it can create apprehension and anxiety, it is a foretaste of a future not yet fully known, a future that draws us ever deeper into God’s mission, a future that is being revealed more clearly each day through the breaking of the bread, the sharing of the cup, our loving care for one another.

Note that in today’s Gospel reading, Martha is in the servant role just as she had been in an earlier Gospel story. And Mary is found again at Jesus’ feet, just as in that previous story. Yet, while Mary is at Jesus’ feet, she is not there just as an attentive disciple, listening to what is being taught. No, she is doing something…something that is beyond expectation … something that is new… something that may not be readily understood. Mary didn’t wash Jesus’ feet with water, as might have been expected. Instead, she anointed his feet with an expensive and fragrant ointment. The house was filled with its heady aroma. Compare this wonderful smell of perfume with the stench outside Lazarus’ tomb when Jesus last visited this family. Then there was sorrow. Now a meal was being celebrated. Then there was a sense of anger and betrayal…. “if only you had been here.” Now there is a sense of wonder and amazement at what Mary was doing. Then there was uncertainty about the future. Now, all seemed to be pointing toward that which had been foretold.

Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet was quite unusual and startling. Yet Jesus did not ask Mary to stop.

Perhaps he was taken too off guard to say anything. Or, perhaps he sensed the fuller significance of this gesture… a sign of love and affection that could only be made now, before his torture and crucifixion, for according to Jewish law, the body of a condemned criminal was not allowed to be anointed after death, before burial. And what about Mary using her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet? A proper Jewish woman would never be seen in a public setting, especially with men present, and not have her hair bound up and covered. To literally let her hair down at this public meal surely raised many an eyebrow. To some, Mary’s behavior would have been unsettling, improper, shocking. The normal reaction would have been to condemn her for her behavior and drive her out of the room.

We don’t know what the reactions were but Mary’s heart was fixed where true joys are to be found, as we heard in the opening prayer today.

Our readings today challenge us to look clearly and unflinchingly at our personal and communal lives, and then determine what will lead us to a discipleship such as Paul’s or Mary’s. The readings challenge us to reorient our thoughts and actions so that, like Paul, we may share more intimately in the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The readings challenge us to perceive more clearly the new things that God is doing in our midst, like Mary anointing of Jesus’ feet, and then follow the leadings of God’s Spirit. During this final week of Lent, may we be up to the challenges that we encounter, always open to the new things that God is doing, ready to share most intimately in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.