



LIGHT FROM THE LECTIONARY

STUDENT PAGES

Lent5C

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From BIBLE STUDIES BY E-MAIL

RCL Readings:

Isaiah 43:16-21

Ps 126

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

MAJOR THEMES

THE PAST is dealt with here in Isaiah as something they needed to forget or cease living in, opening themselves in faith to the new things God was going to do. The Psalm reading is yet another way of dealing with the past - remember it but let it bring you encouragement for the present troubles as you remember all that the Lord has done for you. The Lord is still loving you and looking out for you. In the epistle reading Paul sees his past as nothing more than garbage, "rubble" in comparison to the new hope, the new life he has found in Jesus Christ. He forgets the past and presses forward to become all Christ wants him to be.

LOVE is another important theme here, especially in the Gospel lesson. Mary's act of extravagant love is a foreshadowing of the extravagant love of Christ on the cross. The message is that love gives and gives without counting the cost. Mary is an example of the kind of extravagant, self-giving love we, too, should give Christ and one another. We are empowered to do so when we are truly touched and filled with the love of our crucified Lord.

Isaiah 43:16-21

The Israelites were in Babylonian exile. Who could blame them for being depressed and even for wondering if God had abandoned them? They looked back to the good old days, to their "Golden Years" when God delivered them from bondage in Egypt - the Exodus. They thought their best days were behind them forever. But on the scene comes the prophet who tells them, "You ain't seen nothing yet! Do not keep you eyes on what was but on what can be. For God is about to do something new! Your best, God's best, is yet to be." Just as God had made a way out of Egypt and through the sea, God would make a way through the wilderness between Babylon and their homeland (see vs 19). God will sustain them on this new journey as God sustained them on the old one (vss 20-21). And we know they would be delivered from exile again, a new Exodus, and resettle and rebuild in their homeland.

This truth is not just for those people centuries ago. It's for us. And many of us really need it. For we, too, can begin to believe the best is behind us, that there's nothing to look forward to any longer.

As a pastor, I know that one of the main things that paralyzes people in the

present is the past. Things they did still haunting them. Things they should have done crippling them still. It's like a young woman told me once, "I have made such a mess of my life, how could God love me?" She was living in her past.

Churches can be like this too. They can look back to their golden age, to a former time, a former pastor, a former ministry when everything seemed perfect - as if it really was. Some churches file their future in the past. They cannot see what can be for their preoccupation with what was. They get so used to looking back that they cannot see or envision the present and future God has for them. "We never done it that way" has prevented many a church from seeing the new paths, the new ways God has for them. "God is doing a new thing," the prophet would still remind us.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were also so locked into the past, into their traditions and laws, great as they were, that they could not see the new thing that God was doing in Jesus. In him God was doing something new and wondrous, bringing grace and forgiveness into human life as never before. The best was coming to be in him.

We, too, can get so caught up in what was, in our own traditions and beliefs, even in our own past spiritual experiences that we close ourselves off from the new things God wants to do in and through us. We learn one thing, see things one way, become so rigid that we cannot learn new things, cannot grow anymore. It's not easy for us to change, to grow, to accept and believe in the new things God does and wants to do.

I remember so well a man in a church who hated African Americans. He had been taught that by his father and grandfather - all good church going folks. He even based his hatred on the Bible, just like so many members of the KKK today try to support their sick beliefs and attitudes with the Christian faith. How they justify their beliefs is hard to understand. I made the "mistake" one day of mentioning Dr. King in a favorable way in one of my sermons. The man was livid. He wanted to have me fired. I waited a day or two to let him calm down, then went to talk with him. I listened to him rage until he did calm down some. I told him that I had listened to him and that I asked him to now listen to me. Reluctantly, he did so. I shared with him my reasons for mentioning Dr. King, that I believed that Jesus came to teach us that God loves everyone, red, yellow, black and white, we are precious in God's sight, that it's not fair or Christian to judge others by the color of their skin...He listened, at least I think he did. And over the years I was there I saw him slowly changing in some of his attitudes and things he said. But it was not easy. The past was powerful and he resisted this new thing God was doing and still is doing.

I knew a woman once who came to my church office one day. She confessed to me that she had been a widow for a number of years, had met and fallen in love with another man who had proposed to her. But for over a year she had been refusing him. Why? Because she had the idea that by remarrying she would dishonor her former husband and hurt her children. "But last Sunday, during the service," she said, "I heard God telling me not to live in the past anymore, that God has wonderful new

things for me right now." Soon after that she was walking down the aisle at her wedding. I know for I was there officiating!

We cannot forget the past and I'm not sure we should even try. Only God can totally blot it out. We can remember it and gain what good we can from it. But we must not live there. God has new discoveries for us to make on this journey. Indeed, the best is yet to be.

Ps 126

This is the 7th song in the Song of Ascents, that is, a collection of songs pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to worship would have sung on the way. It has as its major theme the nation of Israel and the Holy City - Jerusalem. So do three other songs in this collection - Psalms 124, 129, and 132. This makes sense because, after all, where was their destination as pilgrims? Jerusalem. It's only natural that they would sing songs of thanksgiving to God for their nation.

The first thing you need to know about this psalm is that it's divided into two sections. Verses 1-3 sing about what God did for the nation in the past. Verse 4-6 sing a song of hope about what God will do in the present.

Have you ever had something so astonishing happen to you that you said, "This has got to be dream! It can't be real!"? Well, that how the people felt in this psalm. Something too good to be true had happened to them - they had been released from exile in Babylon. Many scholars think Psalm 126 was written to celebrate the anniversary of that event.

Recall that their hated enemies, the Babylonians, destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C., burned the Temple Solomon had built, and took many of the people back with them as slaves. For forty years they were in captivity. Ezekiel gives us an unforgettable image of what the nation was like then - a valley of dry bones. In other words, they had no more chance of living again as a nation than did a valley of bones on an old battlefield! But in 538 B.C., the bones began to rattle and stir. Flesh started to form on them again! They came back to life! Another nation, Persia, under King Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians and allowed all Jews (who wanted to) to return home. How they laughed and sang with tremendous joy that day. And everyone, even other nations, had to confess, "The Lord has done great things for them."

But the nation was facing some crisis. It seems that Israel is always in trouble (not unlike most nations). Some scholars think it was a drought and famine since the words here speak of rain and planting. Things must have been tough. Farmers tried to plant seed in parched earth. It seemed hopeless work. Their own tears were the only moisture to fall on the parched land. Yet, they still sang! They still planted! They trusted that God, who had done great things for them in the past, would do it again. They looked at the Negeb, a plain area in the south, which they had often seen dry - covered with wadi's, that is, dry stream beds. The whole country seemed now like one big wadi. But they remembered the times when the rains came and turned the Negeb wadi's into streams of life giving water. So, they sang in hope: "Lord, make us like the Negeb. Bring us back to life as you did

so long ago. Turn the tears we weep now as we plant into the joyous tears of a fruitful harvest."

Philippians 3:4b-14

I served a church once in which a dear friend owned this old orange car. It was only held together by bondo (a kind of patching material used to fill holes and dents on cars) and rust. It was ugly. But he loved that old car. He raised dairy cows and drove it all over his farm. He would even drive it to church. One day, after service, he walked up to me and with some embarrassment said, "Uh, could you help me move my car?"

"It finally gave up the ghost on you, did it?" I asked with a grin, for I was always teasing him about it.

"Not exactly," he muttered. I followed him out to his car. He had parked it about an inch from a large pine tree.

"So, what's the problem?" I asked.

"Well, you see, I do not have a reverse gear in it. It went bad. Didn't think I needed one...until now."

Suppressing another and bigger grin, I helped him back up his old bondo buggy and stood smiling as he cranked it up and went on down the road.

Seems to me that there should be no reverse gear in the Christian life as well. That's what Paul says here. He forgets what lies behind and only seeks to press forward, to grow in his likeness to Christ, in his own walk with Christ.

Paul had a lot in the past to leave behind him. He had been a Pharisee in his love and zeal for the law. In fact, this

zeal had even led him at first to persecute Christians, having all he caught cast into prison. Paul had been very sure of himself, very proud, very self-righteous. He had attained the very heights of his religious faith (vss 4b-6). Apparently Paul feels to say such things because there were people among the Philippians who were questioning his credentials, perhaps at the same time sharing how their own credentials made them more of an authority than Paul. Maybe also there were even those who were teaching that faith in Christ was not enough in itself, that they had to keep all the Mosaic laws and traditions.

Well, Paul tells, then, "Been there, done that. I've been down that road. It's a dead end. Oh, at one time I didn't think so. I thought I was right, that I could earn my righteousness, that by my own works I could make myself acceptable to God. Until that day on the way to Damascus when I met Christ, when I discovered the new and wondrous thing God was doing in Christ. Now I count all of that in the past as loss. It means nothing to me now, for I have found something, Someone far better - Christ. For in him I have experienced the wondrous grace of God, not based on who I am or what I have done, but only on the mercy and love of God. And still I am learning what this means and I will press forward to grow and serve Christ, like a runner does toward the finish line, but not to win a perishable crown but to share his resurrection."

I think part of what Paul is saying here is also that there has to be a holy discontent in a Christian's heart, that is, a ceaseless desire to every be pressing forward, to be growing, learning, becoming more and more like Christ.

Sometimes on this journey we are tempted to stop. We pause and look back, seeing how far we have come, how much we have done, and begin to think, "Well, we have come far enough. We have done well. We do not have to keep going. Let's rest on our laurels."

If anyone had the right to do this, Paul had. He had given his whole life to serving Christ. He traveled and preached all everywhere he could. He often was persecuted, wrongly accused, cast into prison, beaten, shipwrecked. Surely he could stop now and now he had done all he could. But not Paul. "I will press forward," he says. He started a journey long ago on the Road to Damascus and he was not about to stop now. For he walked with Christ. He had the same devotion and love for Christ that Mary displays in the Gospel reading. Nothing mattered more to him than knowing Christ and becoming all Christ wanted him to be.

Paul, too, could have let his past mistakes take away his incentive to press forward and his joy. After all, he had done some pretty bad things. But he had found release from his past in the new thing God was doing in Christ.

One of my best friends in college had lived a pretty rough life. He used every drug available. He hated God and the church. He would drive by a church on Sunday morning and throw beer cans into the yard. He told me all these things and more one night, as he was my roommate in college. My first thought was, "And now I have you in my room for all this semester!" But it was impossible for me to see him in that light or believe that he had ever been that kind of person. You see, he had totally

changed. He was at college to receive training to become a pastor! Imagine this - one of his first sermons was delivered at a church in which he had thrown beer cans into the yard. And I spent that semester and several years after this with the joy of watching him grow in his walk with Christ. His past was behind him. He used it to actually reach persons I never could, because he had been there where they were. He was a new person and he was pressing forward all the time in making new discoveries in his walk with Christ.

John 12:1-8

Perhaps you caught a whiff of the extravagant love that exudes from this story in John. Jesus is in a home in Bethany, a village on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives only a couple of miles or so from Jerusalem. It was only six days until Passover, that special meal that helped them remember how God delivered them from Egyptian bondage and made them a people. On this day, Jesus is having another meal, a special dinner his friends had prepared for him.

Lazarus was there, the one who Jesus had raised from the dead (John 11). He was sitting there enjoying being alive, being with those he loved so much.

Martha, his hardworking, practical minded sister was there, probably busily setting the table and waiting on everyone, making sure everything was just right.

Mary, the open hearted and loving sister of Martha and Lazarus, was there, probably not able to take her eyes off Jesus.

And, of all people, Judas, was there also. Scholars have wondered why. Some even suggest that perhaps he was the eldest brother of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (but there's no proof of this). I can see Judas fumbling with the money pouch, since he was the treasurer for the disciples, knowing that it was not as heavy as it should be because he had been taking from it, and wondering how he was going to replace it.

At some point in the meal, Mary must have looked over at her brother Lazarus who was eating, who had been died to them (but as a friend said, "was now feeling much better"), gets up and rushes from the room. No one pays that much attention to her because she was always the impulsive one. She returns with an ornate jar and sits down at the feet of Jesus. Mary was always at the feet of Jesus (see Luke 10:38).

Perhaps she took off the sandals Jesus was wearing, then perhaps washed his feet with water first (a common practice in those days as your feet got dirty as you walked on the dusty trails). Then she opens the jar of nard, a fragrant oil or perfume made from the nard plant that grew in northern India. No doubt it was the most expensive item Mary owned (about three hundred days' wages).

The fragrance of that perfume filled the house as Mary gently poured it over the feet of Jesus, rubbing it into each callused foot. Then, as if that's not enough, she undoes her long hair and with it dries the feet of Jesus...

Lazarus, I imagine, looks on with a smile, enjoying the aroma and the love that's filling the air.

Martha, too, does not object. She has learned to expect such things from her little sister. And Jesus seems genuinely and deeply touched by such a loving act.

But Judas, he's incensed. He can't keep it in any longer so he bursts out, "What a waste! That's a whole year's wages you have just dumped on the floor. You should have given it to me and I could have sold it and given the money to the poor."

Such an outburst must have hurt and even confused Mary. Jesus comes to Mary's defense. "Let her be," he says. "You will always have the poor with you so that any day you might and should give to them. But Mary knows that I will not always be here. She knows I am about to die, so her act is preparing me for my burial. You should try to see and understand this, Judas." But Judas could not understand such extravagant love.

This story tells me that I will not always have time to show my love for Jesus and others. That when I feel my heart swelling with love, bidding me open my heart like that jar of nard and extravagantly pour out my love, that I should do it. For I have felt this before, only to wait, to think I would do it another day, only to have that impulse fade away and lose the opportunity.

Jesus then went to the cross and there costly poured out his very life for us and the whole world. The world has never seen such an extravagant love as that.

So, take a breath. Can't you, even now,
catch on the breeze the sweet fragrance
of such an extravagant love?

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