

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

April 3, 2022

Fifth Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE “Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Family of God, we gather as who we are, and we bring what we have.

Let us encounter the new thing God is doing among us.

We bring joy and sorrow, hope and despair, resources and need, certainty and questions.

Let us engage the new thing God is doing among us.

In this space, we meet the One who parts seas, creates paths, and changes circumstances.

Let us encourage the new thing God is doing among us. (Cheryl Lindsay, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN No. 59 “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”

I sing the mighty power of God, That made the mountains rise;

That spread the flowing seas abroad, And built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained The sun to rule the day;

The moon shines full at God’s command, And all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord, That filled the earth with food;

God formed the creatures with His word, And then pronounced them good.

Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed, Where’er I turn my eye:

If I survey the ground I tread, Or gaze upon the sky!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Come to this sanctuary, this house, this home, Holy Christ, and let us receive you with lavish welcome. You are the Restorer of our fortunes, The Promise of new life: we pour out our praise to you. Fill this room with your Spirit: the sound of wind, the warmth of flame, the scent of perfume; and fill our hearts with your compassion, not just in this time and place, but in all times and in all places, so that as we celebrate the great things you have done for us, we may also embody the love you give to all. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

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.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (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.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

SERMON

The air in the room must have been alive as they gathered that night, electric enough that the faint of heart should think twice before entering. The siblings 3, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, had talked long and hard before issuing the invitation, but how could they not? They owed Jesus everything. He was their friend, the one they trusted and turned to, and even though it had looked for a few days like he would fail them when things were most drained of hope, he came through in the end. The words still stuck to their tongues when they tried to say it, but he'd brought Lazarus back from the dead. And not back after 2 minutes of moving toward the light; back after four days that had wrapped him up, laid him out and ushered in the distinctive smell of death. Yet here he was, back at home where he belonged, able to take nourishment, gaining strength every day as he checked in with the chores. He didn't talk much about what he'd experienced or how it felt to be back among the living, but Martha and Mary couldn't stop talking about it. And about the fact that Jesus' gift of Lazarus' life had driven the final nail in his own coffin. That was the hard part, the cost he was already paying, and the possibilities of how much higher the price would soar before this was over and done. What had they done? And what could they do now? What could anyone do?

Word of Lazarus' resurrection had spread fast, and it didn't take long for the council to convene and talk through their options. They were terrified of Rome and of Rome's heavy hand if they let Jesus stay in the track he was on. Finally they agreed that it was better to have one person die for the people than to wait around for Rome to destroy the whole nation; so they began to plan to put him to death, starting by issuing an order than anyone who knew where Jesus was must share the information. Meanwhile, Jesus and his disciples laid low in the small town of Ephraim, about 15 miles out of Jerusalem.

As Passover drew nearer, death threats or not, Jesus got back on the road, and continued on toward Jerusalem. Bethany was just on the outskirts, about two miles short, and word reached his friends before he did. Lazarus, Martha and Mary were ready for him, and threw open the door to welcome Jesus and his disciples in. This was a safe place of shelter, the closest thing to home he'd known in months, and they needed to express their gratitude, their regrets and their deep, deep love for him.

Lazarus took his place at the table among the men, while Martha served the meal. It was always hard to know where Mary was going to show up (probably not at Martha's side being useful), but this night, she entered the room carrying a container of perfume, made from the oil of nard and very possibly

imported from India. She broke open the container and poured the perfume on Jesus' feet, at which point the aroma exploded into the room. I don't know much about perfume and nothing about nard, but I can tell you the very idea makes my eyes sting and my nose burn. Absorbed in what she had decided to do, Mary worked the perfume into his feet, and then let down her hair in order to wipe the excess away. It was an amazing gesture, overflowing in intimacy and extravagance, exceedingly articulate in communicating what she knew and what she felt. Had she intended to anoint Jesus as King, she would have put the oil on his head; instead, she moved to his feet and began the action that would prepare a dead man for burial. Painfully aware of what lie ahead for Jesus, comprehending what Peter and the other disciples could not, she offered a surprising excessiveness in both compassion and generosity.

I imagine every eye on Jesus' feet and Mary's hands and hair as she tended to the perfume, no one remembering how to breathe. Wouldn't you know it was Judas who broke the silence and the moment, and he did it by complaining about the waste. Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii; the money could have been given to the poor, which I thought was supposed to be our priority. Just think of all the good it could have done. I'm inclined to agree with Judas, but before I get too far down that road, John uses parenthetical comments to point out that Judas' intentions weren't as pure as he made them out to be: he was, after all, the one who was going to betray Jesus, as well as both an embezzler and a thief. But Judas also drove home the point of the value of what Mary had just done. A pound of perfume is a lot of perfume; and three hundred denarii was the income a laborer could expect for an entire year's work. If one family could have met all their needs with that money, just think how far it could be stretched, how many people could be fed, how much shelter arranged, how many coats and blankets provided. What in the world are you doing pouring it over his feet in such a shameless way? Jesus responded by telling Judas to leave her alone and let the gift be. The champion of the poor, who made a regular practice of elevating their needs, suddenly pulled rank. You will have the poor to look after until the end of time. Just this once, let her look after me, because my time is running out.

Those words of Jesus are confusing, and have left more than a few baffled by what sounds like a casual dismissiveness concerning the needs of the poor. Several commentators that I read said that Jesus is looking at Deuteronomy 15 and words of Moses where he in effect says, since there will never cease to be some need on the earth, I command you to open your hand to the poor and needy. It's a regular, ongoing expectation for the life of faith; the best way to care for the poor is to live with an open hand. Jesus says to Judas, and to everyone else within ear shot, yes you will always have the poor with you – you've already been told what to do about that. And you will not always have me. Leave her alone; she sees what you refuse to see and her gift is overflowing with compassion and generosity.

Lazarus, Martha and Mary, Jesus, Judas and the rest of the disciples all lived in a time of great turmoil and struggle, a time of treachery and betrayal, a world of violence and death. As they gathered in that home that night, six days before the Passover, the stink of Lazarus' death had likely receded, but not the clarity of it. Or the cost that accompanied his gift of new life. And while some of them used every ounce of strength they had to fend off the notion of Jesus' death, that hovered even more closely than Lazarus'. I don't know about you, but it seems to me that the reality of death clings about as closely to us this morning as it did around that dinner table in Bethany. Whether you're inclined to count Covid deaths or Ukrainian and Russian, the suicides that have touched two families related to this congregation in the past few months or the middle school shooting a couple of days ago in South Carolina, the incidence of street violence and police murders that are skyrocketing, death has got us covered. As have violence and greed, selfishness and turmoil, apathy and anger. It's a dark and dangerous world that surrounds us, every bit as much as the one that surrounded that home in Bethany.

And we have choices to make as surely as Mary and Judas, and everybody else at that dinner: whether we will hunker down, draw each other close, pull the shades and try to ride out the storm; or if we will rise and anoint, serve and love, risk and share. Whether we will live with a spirit of abundance and

extravagance or scarcity and reserve. Whether we will care for those in need around us with Mary's open-handed generosity or Judas' tightfisted judgmental greed. Whether we will even begin to approximate the extravagant love of God made visible in the life – and the death of Jesus.

An old Cherokee story frames the question in a very different way, but it's the same question. An old man said to his son, 'A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other wolf is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you.' The son thought about it for a minute and then asked, 'Which wolf will win?' The old man replied simply, 'The one you feed.'

By God's grace, let us follow Mary's example, live in the abundance of love, and do all we can to feed the joy, peace, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and faith that strive to live within us and around us. Amen.

HYMN "Said Judas to Mary"

Said Judas to Mary, "Now what will you do with your ointment so rich and so rare?"
"I'll pour it all over the feet of the Christ, and I'll wipe it away with my hair," she said,
"I'll wipe it away with my hair."

"O Mary, O Mary, O think of the poor. This ointment, it could have been sold;
And think of the blankets and think of the bread you could buy with the silver and gold," he said,
"you could buy with the silver and gold."

"Tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll think of the poor; tomorrow," she said, "not today;
For dearer than all of the poor in the world is my love who is going away," she said,
"my love who is going away."

Said Jesus to Mary, "Your love is so deep, today you may do as you will.
Tomorrow, you say, I am going away but my body I leave with you still," he said,
"my body I leave with you still."

"The poor of the world are my body," he said, "to the end of the world they shall be.
The bread and the blankets you give to the poor you will know you have given to me," he said,
"you'll know you have given to me."

PRAYER REQUESTS

Gail Carlson, recovering from hip replacement surgery

PASTORAL PRAYER

O great and generous God, graciously set your eye this day on those who know their need of you through pain, through trouble, through grief, through their own fault. (*Silence*) Nurse the weak, bandage the broken, console the desolate, forgive the penitent.

O Christ who shared our flesh, graciously set your eye this day on those who have no need of you through pride, through disappointment, through doubt, through the failure of false friends. (*Silence*) Soften the hardened heart, confront the arrogant will, uncover the hidden depths and the truth that sets us free.

O Holy Spirit, breath of God, move among us this day. Open us to the beauty of the earth so that we may become its servants. Open us to the wonder of life that we may recognize an angel at every corner. Open to us the storehouse of your grace and we will be made new for Jesus' sake.

(*A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group*)

And hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus taught his friends, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

For years, I was blessed to have a parishioner named Dick; he sat on the opposite end of the political spectrum from me, but we each cherished the other. After Katrina ravaged New Orleans, I invited members of the church to join me in a week-long service trip to help with the recovery effort, and Dick, somewhere in his 80's, was one of the first to sign up. Now, Dick was a highly skilled builder of fine furniture, but over the course of the trips we took together, we introduced him to a sledge hammer and a crow bar, which he became pretty proficient with as well. About the time I was leaving the church and Dick had decided he might be at the end of his mission trips, I remember him laughing and shaking his head, saying, she thought we could make a difference. And by then, he knew as well as I did that we had made a difference. One home at a time. One pile of trash on the curb, one wall of sheetrock, one tiled floor, one installed window at a time. When we left, another group stepped in and kept the recovery going, and through all of it, people knew they hadn't been forgotten, they were not alone, and they were loved.

When I stand before you week after week and invite you to consider gifts to the church and to God's world, it's essential that you also know I believe our gifts make a difference. Whether we're giving to the One Great Hour of Sharing and responding to hurricanes and tornadoes, wild fires and winter storms, or helping with development in places like Haiti and Myanmar, Kenya and India; or giving through the United Church of Christ or other non-profits in response to the humanitarian disaster in Ukraine, the millions of refugees spreading throughout Europe and around the world; or giving to support our life and ministry together here in Wallace and the Silver Valley, our gifts make a difference. One dollar, one chicken, one blanket, one source of clean water, one bowl of soup, one open door, one friendly face at a time. When our gifts meet up with other people's gifts and together are blessed and transformed by the love of God, they make all the difference in the world. Thank you for doing what you can, and sharing what you have.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Upon your sacred table, O God, we place food and drink and money. Consecrate them all to your holy purpose. As we drink may we know your salvation. In breaking bread may we know Christ's presence. Through the offering of our money may we know that life is sacred and is to be spent in grateful service. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Invitation to Communion (Psalm 126)

Come to this table, wherever it is set, all you who go out weeping, bearing the seeds of desperate hope, lingering sadness, loss, fear, or depression, bearing the seeds of sunflowers.

We come holding hearts, even if we cannot hold hands.

Come to this table, wherever it is set, all you who come home with joy, with release from pain, with new tender love, soft vintage love, child-smile, or good memory.

We come to the ordinary table of God's extraordinary love.

Words of Remembrance and Consecration (John 12:1-8)

We remember so many different tables of Jesus – his acceptance of hospitality from Peter's mother-in-law and Zacchaeus, the Syrophenician woman's challenge, the generous boy with his lunch. We remember a meal Martha served, with food Jesus didn't criticize, a living but endangered Lazarus sitting at the table, and the gift of costly perfume Mary poured over Jesus' feet. There is always controversy about how to love God, live in justice, share compassion.

Jesus remembered six days later what Mary had done and washed his disciples' dirty, calloused toes. We, too, remember – the Passover with a betrayer, a denier, a doubter, all clean and loved. Jesus used what was familiar, accessible and ordinary – bread already on the table, a cup for all lips. And so we share these from our tables – knowing that some of us cook, some anoint, some argue, some simply eat, and there are many present whom Christ has returned to life.

Holy God, bless every piece of bread near the mouth of any one of your children so that it becomes the strength and hope and holiness we need. Bless a small plastic cup or a beautiful chalice, and every glass in between, reminding us that we can never spill our love and we always and in all places drink your healing. Amen.

Words of Institution

We too remember that on the night before he died, Jesus sat at table with his friends and followers. While they were eating, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, saying: Take and eat; this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Later, he took the cup of wine; lifting it first to God in thanksgiving, he gave it to them and said, Take and drink, this is my blood, which is poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, as often as you will, in remembrance of me.

These are the gifts of God for the people of God. Receive them with joy, and pray that by God's grace, they may nurture new life in you.

Sharing the Elements

You hold the Bread of heaven. Honor it. It is consecrated to perfectly match your need. Receive it.

We eat it in hope.

You hold the Cup of blessing. Honor it. It is consecrated so you become a communion of saints. Receive this one small sip – deeply.

We drink it in joy.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (Isaiah 43:16-21) (in unison)

God, we give you thanks that we are the people chosen in this meal, chosen to make new paths, new ways in the wilderness of sorrows, losses and injustices, dangers to all creatures and the earth itself. From this blessed meal we take hope that even war may be quenched, and that we can recognize your new things springing forth, and commit ourselves to be the bringers of their blessings to all people. Amen.

(Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

HYMN No. 87 “*May Jesus Christ Be Praised*”

When morning gilds the skies, My heart awaking cries, May Jesus Christ be praised!

Alike at work and prayer To Jesus I repair, May Jesus Christ be praised!

The night becomes as day, When from the heart we say, May Jesus Christ be praised!

The powers of darkness fear When this sweet chant they hear, May Jesus Christ be praised

BENEDICTION

As you go into the world, may the aroma of your faith fill the air around you. May your hope perfume your encounters. May your touch mend broken walls. And may the God of hope and peace, guide you, envelope you, and sustain you on the journey and in the work. (Cheryl Lindsay, UCC Worship Ways)