

Sermon Lent 5C, April 3, 2022

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

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Complete Readings at https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent5_RCL.html

Thus says the Lord (through the prophet Isaiah):

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.*

It can be hard to let go of old things. Old ideas. Old habits. Old hurts. Old identities. Old STUFF. I have spent the past couple of months trying to sort through all my books and belongings and let go of stuff, in preparation for a move from our single-family home to a larger communal home that we'll share with both family and friends. This is a move filled with hope and joy (and perhaps also some terror). It is a move that reflects a shared dream of living in ways that we believe has the potential to help us all grow in the direction of hospitality, and generosity, and community, and love, that we believe God desires for us, and for the world.

Moving is exciting. But it's also hard. And it's a LOT of work. Especially the "letting go" part. I've found these past weeks that it's helpful to do it in stages. A first pass over the bookshelf to get rid of the books that are easiest to let go... (no, there isn't any good reason to have SEVERAL copies of each book in the Chronicles of Narnia) then another pass after a few days when I'm feeling a little braver (okay, I guess I can borrow that one from the library if I ever *actually* want to read it again.)

The hardest part for me was finally recycling the old notes and papers from various stages of my education, that filled dozens of boxes in my garage. (No, I don't need that handout from massage school with the meridian lines...yes, I can look up that information on the internet. Yes, that was a fascinating paper I wrote on the social-scientific exegesis of the Hebrew Bible in seminary, but no there is not any point in keeping that old pink floppy disk with the files of all my final papers from graduate school.)

*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.*

It can be hard to let go. But it is often necessary. Sometimes we have to loosen our grip, and let some things go, in order to make more space for the abundant new life God desires for all of us to begin to flow through us.

Thus says the Lord (through the prophet, Isaiah):
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?*

The necessary “letting go” that makes room for the “new thing” God is doing in and among us, takes a wide variety of forms.

It seems that, in today’s first reading, the prophet Isaiah is telling God’s people that they have to let go of “Exile” as their defining experience and narrative before they can experience the restoration God is preparing for them.

In today’s Epistle, Paul tells us that it was necessary for him to let go of his power and position as a pre-eminent Pharisee; to let go of all his ethnic and religious pride and privilege— both earned *and* inherited—and to “forget what lies behind” in order to “press on toward...the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”

And today’s Gospel story featuring Mary of Bethany and Jesus, perplexing as it is on so many levels, also nudges us towards the necessity of “letting go.”

Oh, Mary of Bethany. Whenever Mary’s in the room, I raise one eyebrow and cast a vaguely judgy glance in her direction, even as I secretly wish I could be more like her. Maybe some of you can relate.

You might remember the story with Mary of Bethany in the previous Chapter of John’s Gospel, where her sister Martha is all stressed out and running around trying to get ready to host a dinner party for Jesus and his disciples, while Mary is just sitting there at Jesus’s feet, basking in the glow of his presence and teaching. Of course, I’d love to sit at Jesus feet and bask in the glow, too, but I can’t help but sympathize with Martha’s frustration—how dare you just sit there when there’s so much to do???? (My family will be the first ones to tell you just HOW much I’ve been sympathizing with Martha these past couple weeks in the thick of this move.)

Ahh, but there—right in the midst of my stress and anxiety and righteous indignation— comes God’s invitation to let go... Martha, Sylvia, if only you would let go of your old sense of responsibility, your old ideas about gender roles, your old habits of anxiety; your old belief in the scarcity of time and help—Martha, Sylvia, let go of some of these “old things”, and come rest at my feet, come bask in my presence, come drink in my teaching.

In **today’s** Gospel, the story continues, as we meet Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha again. Once more, there’s a dinner. Once more, Martha serves. But this time Mary does more than just sit at Jesus’ feet. *Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet with it, then wipes them with her hair.* Ummmm. I mean, I was a massage therapist and a dancer and I’m a pretty “touchy feely” person. And, having lived and worked in the very diverse and liberal milieu

of Berkeley and San Francisco for 15 years, it's pretty hard to scandalize me, but I'll admit this scene makes me feel more than a little bit uncomfortable. She wipes his feet with her hair. It seems like a lot, even to me. And, I doubt any of us wants to admit to siding with Judas Iscariot, but he has a point when he asks "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" We might not have said it, but we were probably thinking it.

And, oh, there it is! Right there in the midst of my discomfort and anxiety and judgment, God's gracious and persistent invitation to let go. To let go of our anxiety about touch, and propriety. To let go of our judgements about how women should and shouldn't behave. To let go of our anxiety about money and resources and scarcity and control.

And, last but not least, to let go of the false dichotomies and narratives that force us to choose between offering extravagant expressions of love and generosity to the one OR the many, the beloved OR the stranger, the sanctuary OR the street, Jesus OR the poor.

[The devil advises us to hold on tight and bargains in the narrow realm of either/or. The Spirit invites us to let go, and embrace the spacious possibility of "both/and". As renowned Christian ethicist & theologian Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that "The poor that we always have with us is Jesus. It is to the poor that all extravagance is to be given."]

For those in the Church, Lent is traditionally a season of fasting... of paring down... of letting go. And, like culling my books and preparing to move, our Lenten "letting go" is often best done in stages. I've heard the same is true for pilgrims who walk the Camino...that with each passing mile, with each passing day, they find something else from their backpack that they can leave behind to lighten their load for the journey ahead. What once seemed indispensable eventually becomes added weight and excess baggage.

Beloved of God,
the voice of
the Creator of the Universe,
the Lover of Souls,
the Spirit of Life,
Is calling out to each one of us this day, saying:

**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?**

As we enter into these final days of Lent, what added weight and excess baggage is God calling you to leave behind? What is God inviting you to "let go of" now —to lighten your load for our

upcoming pilgrimage through Holy Week towards Easter? To make space for the new thing God is doing within and around us?