

## *Reflecting Gratitude*

Isaiah 43: 16-25     John 12: 1-8

Richard Stearns, president of Christian relief charity *World Vision*, visited a church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, nearly a year after the tragic earthquake. This church's building consisted of a tent made from white tarps and duct tape, pitched in the midst of a sprawling camp for thousands of people who were still homeless.

In the front row of that church sat six amputees ranging in age from 6 to 60. They were clapping and smiling as they sang song after song and lifted their prayers to God. The worship was full of hope, and with thanksgiving to the Lord.

No one was singing louder or praying more fervently than Demosi Louphine, a 32-year-old unemployed single mother of two. During the earthquake, a collapsed building crushed her right arm and left leg. After four days both limbs had to be amputated. But here she was, leading the choir, standing on her prosthesis and lifting her one hand high in praise to God.

Following the service, Stearns met Demosi and her two daughters who were living in a tent just five feet tall and perhaps eight feet wide. She had lost her job, her home, and two limbs. Yet she was deeply grateful because God spared her life. "He brought me back like Lazarus, giving me the gift of life," says Demosi. She believes she survived the devastating quake for two reasons: to raise her girls and to serve her Lord for a few more years.

Richard Stearns said: "Here in this place, many people who had lost everything expressed nothing but praise. They have so much more to offer me than I to them. I feel pity and sadness for them, but it is they who might better pity me for the shallowness of my own walk with Christ."

This mother who had lost an arm and a leg could have been bitter about the loss. No one would have blamed her. But with her faithfulness to God, anchoring her in a spirit of gratitude, she had recognized blessing, not loss. God had done a new thing, created a new way forward for Demosi. It was not like the old way, and it brought with it huge challenges and obstacles. However, her faithful spirit receives this new way gratefully. She understands that this new way is authored **by God for her**. She embraces the new way, for it is the way that God has provided *for her*.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet reflects God's words, speaking to the defeated people of God who had been carted off to serve the Babylonian empire.

Today's text starts as God recalls the Exodus when God's people took the highway created by God through the sea. At that time, God created dry land and a safe passage through the mighty waters for his people.

Sandwiched between two sections is this: *Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past. See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

It's a bit ironic since the listener is told to *forget the former things* just after the history has been recalled, but that's rhetorical, of course. It's really a reminder that God has acted in amazing ways in the past and is doing so again, but it is truly **a new thing**.

Isaiah describes this new thing of God's creation. We hear how God now creates springs and streams, water in the desert, commanding the waters again in unheard of ways, and in absurd locations, too. God once again puts a highway where there had been no passage for his people as during the Exodus. It's the opposite of the sea barrier that faced God's people fleeing Egypt. Rather than the sea, they face nothing but a trackless desert land of imminent death; there is no passage for God's people here either. But in both cases, God acts to bring salvation and new life to God's people. It is truly **a new thing, a new way**.

This time, God intends to command, not Pharaoh in Egypt, but Cyrus the Great of Persia, ending oppression and exile in Babylon for his people. Unlike Pharaoh's resistance in the Exodus, God actually finds a partner in Cyrus of Persia who comes to be known as God's first messiah for God's people. God declares that new events are coming that will be blessings, gracious and wonderful.

In this desert landscape, God plans a stunning new thing, bringing flowing streams of water to animate life over death. This is greeted with awe by wild animals as jackals and owls are heard offering praise in howls and hoots. Even wild animals praise God for this blessing.

But something is missing. As jackals and owls, the wild animals of the desert offer their instinctive praise and thanksgiving for this blessing, there is **no** chorus of praise from God's people. They have made no response.

God's word of condemnation follows as the blessing of God has been taken for granted, or ignored with strange indifference. Is this rich blessing of providence regarded as *expected*, as if God should do *no less* for his people? Or are God's people unable to recognize what was done for them, incapable of comprehending something new from God? Or are God's people indifferent, so long in captivity that they have accommodated themselves to their slavery and accepted their servile role in Babylon?

Bible scholar Claus Westermann said that it's possible their faith had become so focused on the past that they could not see anything new. He says God's people need *to be shaken out of a faith that has nothing to learn about God's activity, and therefore has nothing to learn about what is possible with God; [this is] the great danger which threatens any faith **hidebound in dogmatism**, faith that has ceased to be able to expect anything really new from God.* Have God's people been so utterly focused on what God did in the past, so myopically backward-looking in their anxiety about the future, that they only see backward and cannot imagine anything new or surprising to

happen in the present or the future. When this occurs, God is reduced to a meaningless relic of the past.

In any case, no sacrifices of thanksgiving, no offerings of joy or praise come from God's people to this gracious blessing. It's compounding the problem. God's people have not only been silent, they've multiplied their sinfulness. God's people – *formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise* (vs. 21) – have turned blessing into sin, and season for praise into a time for their condemnation.

The Hebrew translated as *you've burdened me with your sins* (v. 24) is literally “**you've caused me to serve your sins.**” Theologically, this should be impossible – hence the translation. Rhetorically, it's awesome and devastating. The people who should be serving God, have instead expected God to serve them and their sinfulness. The relationship is fully distorted and corrupted. God's people resist the new thing God is doing, expecting God to leave them alone *and* remain passive toward their sinfulness. God's new thing does not fit into their plans.

God's final word comes in vs. 25. Despite the inexcusable ingratitude and faithlessness, earning renewed condemnation and punishment, God declares, *I am he who blots out your sins **for my own sake**, and remembers your sins no more.* Despite the clear human sinfulness, the people's disdain for their God and what God would do, it is God who acts incredibly – *for his own sake* – granting gracious forgiveness, establishing once again God's amazing grace.

In John's gospel, the scene is in Bethany, just prior to his entry into Jerusalem. Jesus dines with friends together with Lazarus, the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead in the previous chapter. At this dinner, Mary, sister of Martha, takes a pint (pound) of expensive perfume, pours it on Jesus' feet and wipes with her hair.

The whole scene must have had everyone's attention, particularly Judas who objects vehemently to Mary's action. It counters all the values that Jesus has been preaching about and living in his ministry. Judas schools **Jesus**, asserting that this exceedingly expensive item could have been converted into cash and provided help for the poor. It was worth a year's wages.

Let's remember: with perfume, a little goes a long way. A few drops are plenty. The text details how the perfume is poured out and gets spread on his feet by Mary's hair. The point is the unjustifiable, impractical, crazy extravagance. That's what Judas sees. It's a gigantic and costly waste, so contrary to Jesus' humility, simplicity, and concern for sharing with the poor.

Jesus chastises Judas: “Leave her alone!” Perfume would have been for Jesus' burial, a gift upon his death. That's the only time when you **anoint feet**. Pointing to a dead end future, Mary chose to make the gift while Jesus was living, before he entered Jerusalem, knowing the religious powers plotted his elimination.

Besides, the poor are a constant in a sinful world where injustice and oppression, greed and arrogance are our common everyday patterns. In fact, we accommodate our notions of the poor by blaming and judging them, decrying their failures in order to justify our own failures, our own sinful unwillingness to love them extravagantly.

If we discount the editorial remarks, and we just listen to Judas's comments, we hear the accuracy of what Judas is saying. We hear his desire to fulfill the teachings and values that Jesus had shared with his disciples.

But Jesus perceived something more in this exchange with Judas. Judas' spirit, was bitter and narrow as he criticized not so much Mary as **Jesus** who allowed it to happen and did nothing to stop her or correct her. Judas is scrupulous, legalistic, and calculating. This is a different spirit than one of genuine compassion and charity that Jesus had taught, the servant spirit, the healing spirit. Judas uses his understanding of Jesus' teaching to catch Jesus in inconsistency and sinful corruption. Judas's self-righteousness is his ruination. Ultimately, he is resistant to the whole truth of Jesus' teaching, exploiting the letter and working against the spirit of God's good news.

As in last week's Prodigal Son where different players stake different roles, the counterpoint to Judas is Mary herself. She has a different spirit. At a dinner with Jesus, she is caught up in his spirit, and she may well have had a foreboding about the imminent journey into Jerusalem. Motivated by a purity of love and adoration for Jesus, she acts on that spirit, a servant spirit, a healing spirit, not counting the cost but merely acting, perhaps rashly, impulsively, but certainly lovingly, graciously, and with irrational, unconscionable and unjustifiable extravagance.

With Jerusalem and Holy Week on the horizon, the motivations in this drama reflect the spirit that's hostile to Jesus, **and** that's also full of righteousness. And there's the spirit within Jesus that shares wondrous abundance, praises with extravagance, and loves recklessly.

His foes will charge him with violating sacred principles, ignoring their authority, undermining their control, and threatening their position. They are of the same spirit that afflicted Judas. Covered in righteousness, they will be revealed in truth, as bearing a sinful spirit that resists God's new word and new way of life in Jesus.

Jesus will bear the kind of spirit that Mary revealed, giving at an amazing cost, offering his most precious gift in faithfulness to God. Both Jesus and Mary did what they did anyway, even though, as impractical as it was. Practicality has scant relation to faithfulness and grace. It is of a different spirit, a different motivation.

As we come to the final stretch to Jerusalem, may we be witnesses to Jesus' new path. May we find our spirits blessed with God's grace, reflecting the extraordinary extravagance of love with passionate gratitude. Be ready to stand as witnesses to God's new word, reflecting gratitude to our loving Savior and his new life promise.