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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/13/2016, The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 43. It asks the Israelites to *forget* something. Now, to forget something *bad* is often okay. Our sins, for example: For our sins to be lost in the sea of God's forgetfulness is a good thing. And if we have confessed our sins, done what we can to set things right, and have received absolution, it is good for us to forget those sins too as best we can. But the interesting thing about this opening text is that the LORD is asking the Israelites to forget something, not bad, but good — indeed wonderfully good. But as we shall see, the LORD asks his people to forget the wonders of the past, for the sake of being open to something even better ahead for them in the future. Our text, then, goes this way:

Thus says the LORD,
¹⁸Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
¹⁹Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Imagine a kind-hearted king who takes a pauper child from the streets, raises that child in the palace, and makes that child an inheritor of the royal estate. Imagine that child to have been homeless before, living in the allies and basement stairwells, huddling in rags and cardboard against the cold — weak, and vulnerable. To be homeless is one of the saddest things on earth. By God's grace, many a poor person at least has a home to return to at the end of the day. It might be a humble and hard dwelling, but it is home. It is a place where the poor person has the key, a place where he or she can lay down his head, it is some shelter against the storms of life. But imagine this pauper child to have been homeless. Maybe the child is an orphan, maybe the child has simply been tossed out by cruel parents. The child has no home, no place he can call his own, her own. Sickness and bullies and accidents come the way of the child, but the child has no particular place to limp to, to regain strength, to have some measure of peace in life.

Now imagine that the king hears of such a child, fetches the child to the palace, nourishes the child to strength, educates the child, protects the child, so that bit by bit, the child is able to think of himself, no longer as homeless, but as wanted and as part of a good family.

Something of this sort happened to the Israelites long ago. Perhaps their lot was even worse than that of the pauper child, for they were not simply homeless, but rather they were slaves. They might have had homes to return to after their

day's labor under Pharaoh's taskmasters, but those homes were not really their own. Those homes were but resting places provided for them by a Pharaoh who wanted to exhaust them and to work them into the ground. What devilish ideas had occurred to Pharaoh. He had noticed that the Israelites were having many children and growing in number (Exodus 1). He feared this growing population of immigrants. He commanded the midwives, then, to kill the Israelite baby boys. Glad to say, those midwives did not always comply with the royal order, brave women that they were. So the Israelites continued to grow in population. Pharaoh, then, decreed a plan whereby he could kill two birds with one stone. He resolved to enslave the Israelites and work them to death, and in the process build himself some nice cities through the labor of these slaves:

Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. (Exodus 1:11, KJV)

It was to such poor and oppressed people that the LORD had come and rescued them. Old Testament scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier does a nice job describing the troubles and sorrows of the Israelite slaves and how extraordinary it was that the LORD should give his heart away to this oppressed population. She writes this:

The Lord not only rules Israel's life, however; he also began Israel's life. He is their creator. There was no people of Israel when they were slaves in Egypt. They were simply a ragtag bunch of seminomadic Semites, a "mixed multitude" (Exod. 12:38), some of them heirs of Jacob, some of them not, toiling in the mud pits of Rameses II and looking for help from any quarter. But the Lord saw their affliction and heard their cries (Exod. 3:7) and set his love upon them, adopting them as his son (Hos. 11:1), as his family member, and delivering them out of slavery. With that act by God, Israel was formed as a people who had all been redeemed together. That became their founding story and the basis on which they then pledged their loyalty as one people to one Lord in the Sinai covenant.¹

Do you see what I mean? The LORD's election of Israel was like a king's adoption of a pauper child. It changed everything! The LORD's choice of Israel resulted in the wonders of the Exodus — the way the LORD opened a path in the sea and let the slaves go free. The LORD's choice of Israel meant that the LORD shared the mysteries of a good life with the Israelites by way of the Ten

¹The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts: (Kindle Locations 5310-5314). Kindle Edition.

Commandments, and Israel reciprocated her love of the LORD by agreeing to the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

Now the prophet Isaiah comes along and preaches that the Israelites should “remember not the former things.” That would be like Americans forgetting George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. It would be like us being told to forget the heroes and the sacrifices of the past. It would be asking us to forget the very past that has made us the people we are. Except that in the case of the Israelites, they were not forgetting human deeds — human heroism and human sacrifices — but rather the foundational deeds of Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth.

Why would Isaiah preach such a thing — such an appeal to forgetfulness? Two reasons come to mind: First, the people *needed* a fresh burst of hope. And second, that fresh burst of hope is indeed coming, and it was only honesty on Isaiah’s part to say so.

The Israelites of Isaiah’s time were at low ebb and had been for quite a while. The glory days of King David were long gone. The majesty of the temple in Jerusalem was but a memory, for that temple had been destroyed by the Babylonian armies. The Israelites of Isaiah’s time had languished in captivity for more than a generation. They knew all the stories of Israel’s past. They knew about the Exodus, they knew about the Promised Land, they remembered King David and the wealth and influence of King Solomon, but all those good memories now seemed almost irrelevant to them. They are a conquered people and they are discouraged.

To such disheartened people, the LORD commands Isaiah to promise that something good is afoot. Some measure and foretaste of that goodness is revealed in the release of the Israelites from Babylonian captivity, and yet that release does not do justice to what Isaiah is proclaiming:

¹⁹Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19, RSV)

King Cyrus of Persia conquers the Babylonians, and releases the Israelites, and some of them limp back home to try to rebuild their land. But Isaiah is proclaiming something greater than this. The hope contained in Isaiah’s preaching cries out for a greater fulfillment than Israel was able to know back in those days.

Now, let’s move ahead to today’s Gospel story about Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with the expensive and fragrant ointment. This story reveals another side of Isaiah’s good old prophecy. Isaiah had said that the LORD was up to something new — a “new thing.” What Isaiah had not revealed in this particular passage is that this new thing was going to take a toll, it was going to exact a very high cost. Indeed, it was going to require a very high cost from God himself, even the death of the only begotten Son of God.

The fragrance of that anointing filled the house. Judas complained about the expense, but Judas, hold back! You do not know what you are saying. Jesus says

that Mary is anointing his body “for the day of my burial.” And that day is not far off. Here we are, the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Good Friday will soon be here — twelve days off on our calendar. Judas, do not complain or hinder Mary, for there is a holy momentum toward Golgotha and toward the death and burial of Jesus. That momentum must go ahead, else Isaiah’s promise of old will never be fulfilled. Jesus must in fact suffer that Cross and death, lest you and I be lost. The gospel, then, is that Jesus goes on his path, suffers that holy death, and you and I are not lost!

Isaiah had encouraged the Israelites to look for something good. I would do the same for you and for me. Let us not imagine that our prayers, for example, are in vain. Let us not suppose them to be empty puffs of breath directed toward an indifferent universe. Let us not imagine our discipleship behind Lord Jesus to be of no account. Let us not picture a cold universe or some cruel devil laughing at us, as if a holy life was but squandered chances to serve ourselves.

Let us not sigh and figure that there is no point in voting in this upcoming election, no point in integrity on our job, no point in faithfulness to our family, no point in anything at all except trying to wrangle some good state of ourselves from out of life’s chances. Let us not, I say, yield to despair or to cynicism or to egoism. Those were the temptations for the Israelite exiles in Babylonian captivity. If they should be the temptations for us too, then let us laugh at Satan, and say, “Oh no, Mr. Devil. You are not going to trick me! My Lord Jesus has drunk the cup of suffering to the bitter dregs, he has died and yet lives again. He makes everything good worthwhile. He means that I can strive for a noble life — a noble life of love and service to others. My Lord Jesus means that nothing good shall be lost and none of our struggles to be good people in this world will have been in vain. So, be gone, Mr. Devil. I mean to stick with Jesus and to be happy in doing so.”

The house “was filled with the fragrance of the ointment,” our text says (John 12:3) It seems fitting that this should be so, that there should be some sweetness in this world because of Jesus. Indeed, let us be some of that sweetness. Let us be the very oil poured out on the feet of Jesus. Let our lives and our connection with Jesus make this world a more bearable and fragrant place, until he comes again as Lord of all, and to whom the glory belongs, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.