

**A MOMENT TO REJOICE; ISAIAH 43:16-21, JOHN 12:1-8; LENT V, 3/13/16;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It is six days before Passover. Jesus is close to the Holy City. The authorities there have plotted, since he raised Lazarus from the tomb, for a way to kill him. Everyone seems to know this and no one thinks Jesus will still go to Jerusalem.

There is a crowd at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Martha is preparing a feast for the man who raised her brother from the dead. While Martha is in the kitchen, Mary, in the outer room, lets down her hair, opens a container of valuable perfume made of pure nard and anoints Jesus' feet.

Judas looks on with scorn. We know he is not an honest man. He keeps the disciples' purse from which he regularly steals. Feigning virtuous motives he condemns Mary's act of devotion saying the nard could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus responds, 'the poor you always have with you, you will not always have me.'

The story drips with irony; Lazarus, the dead man who is now alive, sits next to Jesus, who is living and will soon be dead.

Judas, the thief, espouses concern for the poor, exposes his greed and pre-views his desertion of Jesus; one thinks of Marilynne Robinson's critique of the liberal Protestant desertion of Jesus both in the academy and public sq.

Yet, most striking of all is Mary's choice to anoint Jesus' feet and not his head. Anointing the head was an honorific gesture. Anointing of feet was an act reserved for the preparation of a corpse for burial.

Isaiah today recalls God's deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh when the sea parts and Moses leads the people to freedom. This is the core narrative of Israel; just as God's deliverance from death in Jesus' resurrection is the core narrative of Christians.

It is peculiar that after recounting the glorious deliverance of Israel from the threat of Pharaoh that Isaiah tells the people to forget the former things, the things of old – and offers as a substitute: "I am about to do a new thing."

If Israel rejoiced when they were saved from Egypt, the generation to whom Isaiah was speaking that was led into exile in Babylon, were about to participate in something even more magnificent.

Both narratives are told against the backdrop of death; both offer the promise of new life. Jesus will go to Jerusalem, be killed and raised; the people of Israel will be released from bondage in Babylon and allowed to return to rebuild their homeland.

Today, on the road of repentance, in Lent, we have cause as Mary and Martha had cause to give thanks to Jesus; and we have cause as God's people in exile in Babylon had cause to forget their troubled past and look to the new thing God was about to do. Today is a moment to rejoice in God's rescuing love.

The challenge for modern, liberal Christians is how to be open to "the new thing God is doing" in our midst. The message of rescue and redemption proclaimed today is offered not only to a world torn by strife but to each one of us exiled by our own fear and anxiety.

The music today is the equivalent of costly nard. It fills this room like the aroma of perfume with ethereal melodies and harmonies in praise of the Creator's tireless wooing and deeply sacrificing to win our allegiance and devotion. We give considerable resources to worship, music and to this very sanctuary; indeed, when this room was restored in the mid-90s for over a million dollars there were some in the congregation who questioned our priorities in ministry.

What about the poor? We are an urban church surrounded by poverty, in a deeply segregated city. We could sell the buildings, the land, the stained glass and maybe alleviate the suffering around us for a day but not for a year or ten years when poverty and racism will still plague this community.

Or, with the clear-eyed realism of Mary, who knew what the world was about to do to the man who gave her brother new life, we can do what she did; we can offer to the Giver of Life the best that we have in an act of praise and adoration.

The audience for our worship is not the people but God. All of us together offer our prayers and singing and reverent silence to the Creator and Sustainer of Life.

There's a misconception in some communities that worship is about entertainment- about funny sermons and diva solos and lots of lights and action. To be sure, there is a performance quality the leaders of worship need to honor, otherwise what takes place here would be like attending a formal dinner without observing the social graces and table etiquette.

But the One we are all here to please is God. And from its very beginning in antiquity and through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the present the church has enlisted the best artists and musicians and poets it could find to fulfill our most important calling- giving praise to the One who is the source of life itself.

The work for justice and peace in this city and beyond will continue to be among the highest priorities of Westminster.

But today, on Masterwork Sunday, and here in this sanctuary on each and every Sunday we will also offer the best we have in song and liturgy and spoken word to the Creator of Life.

As St. Augustine said, "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee". God can be encountered anywhere; but it is consistently in great music that we meet the Holy One; in meditations too deep for words. Amen.