

**Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8**

**Imagine the sounds of the laughter and conversation coming from the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Imagine the clinking of dishes, the smell of roast goat, figs, dates and yogurt, the easy intimacy of friends brushing arms as they reach for more food. All of a sudden, the pungent smell of spices fills the room. Everyone stops to watch as Mary kneels on the floor at Jesus' feet, intent on rubbing the oil into them, and drying them with her long hair.**

**Suddenly Judas stands, and the bench he has been sitting on topples to the floor. He points an accusing finger "What is she doing? That ointment could have been sold! Who is she to be so wasteful? 300 denarii – an entire year's wages – we could have given it to the poor. We could have been applauded for our generosity. We could have demonstrated how much we care.**

**But Judas has something to hide. He doesn't care about the poor – doesn't give a hoot about them. He complains about the expensive perfume because he has missed the chance to sell it and embezzle some of the money from the common purse into his own pocket. Judas is a thief – and a betrayer. He has made his own deal with the religious leaders, who are right now looking for Jesus and Lazarus.**

**And then, in the stunned silence, Jesus says something that sounds quite strange. "Leave her alone. She bought it to keep for the day of my burial. You always have the poor, but you do not always have me."**

**For the moment, Jesus is safe eating and drinking with his friends in Bethany. But he knows what is ahead. John is careful to tell us that it is six days before the Passover. In**

**one week Jesus will be dead on a Roman cross, and Mary and the other women will indeed be preparing his body for burial.**

**We know this story. Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion and death lie directly ahead. But that will not be the end.**

**In all of the readings for today, there is a sense of looking backward and then looking forward, looking to the past and looking to the future. We are asked to focus ourselves, not on what lies behind, but what is to come.**

**From Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Whatever gains I had I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."**

**And from Psalm 126: "those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy.**

**And from 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?"**

**There is more going on here than a story about Mary the model disciple and Judas the model of how not to be a disciple. It's about how we perceive –**

**Do you not perceive it? To perceive means more than just to see. It means to recognize. To perceive means more than just to identify. It means to understand.**

**Judas doesn't perceive the new thing. He is living in the past. He mentions the poor in order to manipulate the others into guilt. He is looking backward, trotting out the old, familiar clichés. Judas is stuck in the way of dying, always looking behind him, always looking over his shoulder. He is locked in his isolation, alone in his fear. He doesn't understand that Jesus is about to change everything.**

**I am about to do a new thing, says the Lord. Do you not perceive it?**

**Mary DOES perceive it. She has seen Jesus raise her brother Lazarus from the dead. She knows that death is not the end of the story. Mary understands the way of living. She lives the words of the Psalm: she has sown with tears, and she knows that she is now reaping with a song of joy. She doesn't speak any words, but she offers something over-the-top extravagant response to what has been done for her. It is an intimate moment and in that moment Mary looks forward to life in deep relationship. She knows that her friend and her teacher and her Lord Jesus offers her a new way of living. And so she offers to Jesus something more valuable than any expensive perfume. Mary offers to Jesus her very own being.**

**What lies behind you? There's the part of your life that you've already lived. We all have a past. We all have memories and backgrounds and family stories and experiences that make us who we are. Like Paul, we each can make a list of what we have inherited and what we have achieved: Here is Paul's list: He is a Jew from his birth, of the tribe of Benjamin – meaning he knows where his family comes from. He is a Pharisee – meaning he has the benefit of education. He can even brag about his religious credentials: he has followed the law of Moses his entire life – he is so blameless, in fact, that at the beginning of his career he pursued and persecuted those who followed Jesus.**

**Here is my list: I come from a good family, too – my father was active in politics and my mother was active in the church. I grew up with support and encouragement for my musical talent, support and encouragement for my intellectual abilities. I have a degree from Washington University and another from Binghamton University and yet another from Duke. I had a successful first career, raising money for arts institutions and universities, helping people give to causes and institutions that did good work.**

**What is on your list? The family you came from? The education you have? The career you have or the one you used to have, the sense of achievement from a job well done? Do you have a “ledger” by which you measure and compare your own worth to other people? Take a moment and turn to someone sitting near you. Talk for a few minutes about what you have inherited and what you have achieved that has made you the person you are...**

**“Whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss because of Christ,” writes Paul. What is it that changes when you finally set aside the comparing, the measuring, the achieving? What happens when you give up the certainty of the past for the hope of the future? What happens when you stop looking backward at your own past progress in order to live looking forward to the life that Christ has promised to you?**

**We are deep in Lent. Some of us may be getting tired, really and truly tired of our Lenten disciplines. Turn on the television, and all it seems that you see are people screaming at each other. Politics at an impasse. Reality shows where each week someone has to lose, and those who are left get more and more vicious. Even the weather seems to come in extremes – it’s only March and already the temperature has been in the 70’s.**

**We long for Easter to come.**

**So this story comes to us right now to fortify us for the last part of the Lenten journey. We get a glimpse of the dawn breaking on the horizon. We perceive the abundance and extravagance that God promises – grace without measure, grace that never runs out. “I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it?”**

**Jesus will become like Lazarus – he will really and truly die. As we all will. Death is the future that we all share. We don’t get to Easter without Good Friday. There will be**

**loss. There will be suffering. Mary's gift will not save Jesus' life. But out of her love for him and knowing his love for her, she gives it anyway.**

**I am thinking about the moments of extravagant sharing that I have witnessed in the past week. I think about those in this room who fill bags with groceries and make them available for anyone who asks. I think about those in this room who shared food and fellowship on Wednesday evening at dinner. I think about those in this room who are praying every single day for someone else in the congregation. I think about those in this room who reach out to others in compassion, no matter who, no matter what the situation.**

**Your life is precious and expensive perfume. Every time you reach out with a word of encouragement, every moment that you spend listening to someone's story, every action that you take to share in another person's life, you break open that jar and pour it on Jesus' feet.**

**"I am about to do a new thing," says the Lord. "Do you perceive it?"**