

April 3, 2022

Pr. Steve

In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the first lesson for today, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to people in captivity. 50 years, the people had been in captivity in Babylon, and, you know, that wears upon people, and breaks them down, and gives them no hope. 50 years, two--almost three--generations of captives. And Isaiah wants to give them a new vision. He wants to give hope to the hopeless. And so he says,

'Do you remember? Do you remember our ancestors, and what they went through? How God made a pathway through the raging waters, and crushed Pharaoh's army, the chariots never to rise again, making a path through the impossible. Do you remember that?'

And the people said, 'Yeah.' And Isaiah says, *'Forget about it! No need to remember the past. God wants to do something new with you!'*

In the second lesson for today, Paul says, *'You want credentials, I've got them. I was born into them. I've got everything you want. I'm purebred, pure stock. They don't come better than me!!'*

And now, all that stuff is nothing. I want to know Christ. I don't need this subservience to the law, and the affliction of trying to be good all the time. It's an affliction. All I want to know is Christ. I want to be molded to the pattern of Christ's death.'

What a provocative statement! I think in the whole of the New Testament, this is one of the most outrageous and beautiful and stunning:

'I simply want to be molded to the pattern of Christ's death.'

What is he talking about? Well, Jesus, is the one for Paul who gives a total commitment to the joy of God, to the love of Truth, stirring unending compassion and unconditional mercy for all, for all, for all!

'All I want is the harmony of human beings. I want a community realized that will live in communion with all life.' That's Jesus' passion.

And that's the reason he gets killed--because you can't make a profit when there's communion with all life.

'Somebody's got to be better. Somebody's got to have more. Somebody has to be lower. Right? That's just the way the world is. Can't do anything about it. Get your piece of the pie, right?... Cope!'

And Christ refused to do that. Paul says, 'I want to be molded to that pattern. That's the life for me--which leads to that resurrecting life.'

So, in the Gospel, we have a dinner party today. Now, my mother was a great hostess--Bev is too--but the story is about my mother. My father was a professor. We had a lot of student groups over. Frequently I was in the kitchen, helping my mom--I think I was in middle school--just getting everything prepared. And a student steps in, 'Need any help?' My mom says, 'Yeah, won't you take that tray downstairs, where we're gathering?' 'Okay.' Now that tray--this was her finest silver platter--with the best china, and the crystal glasses. And it was all prepared, well.

So he picked up the tray, walks over to the stairs. Now, he knew, my mother knew, and I knew that he only had one leg. (The prosthesis, you know in those days, was almost a waste of time.) So he took the tray with the finest, and on one leg [sound effects] going down the wooden steps, to the landing, and around the corner, and down the next six to eight steps. [sound effects] And I learned a lesson from my mother that day: *You prepare the best, and then you give it away. You release it. You entrust it to others.* 'Prepare your best. Give it away.' Whew. And nothing was broken...and it wouldn't have bothered her if it was.

So, there's a dinner party in Bethany. And it's six days before Passover--you remember Passover, *"the raging waters parted, and Pharaoh's army were drowned"*? [Negro Spiritual] Forget about it. They're invited to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. These are just the best friends of Jesus and the disciples--close intimate friends, so many experiences they had already shared.

Martha is a woman of action. She shows her love and gratitude in the preparations and making a wonderful meal.

And there's Lazarus, who you might remember maybe just a few days before--maybe it was a couple of weeks--was raised up from the dead. I don't know about you, I've not been to too many dinners with people who were formerly dead. What do you say to these people,

'How is death?'

'It was nothing.'

And Mary, soul sister of Jesus, who during this dinner (people would recline on low couches around the perimeter of the room, that was just normal at that time), walks in with this jar of pure nard. It was exceedingly expensive. And when she opens it, it just permeates the whole home with its fragrance and aroma. Have you

had moments like that? You just...Ooh, it's good to be alive. Then she anoints Jesus' feet. '*Blessed are the feet of those who bring peace,*' say the Scriptures. And she pours it out.

Can you imagine this scene? What's happening? Does Jesus look at her? Or does he just close his eyes and absorb this blessing? Is Mary weeping? I find it impossible to see otherwise as she's massaging his feet with this glorious ointment.

The disciples, even Lazarus, [said], 'What's going on? This is public! What is she doing?' She could see what nobody else wanted to admit--she is anointing the feet of a dead man. She knew it. He will be dead soon.

You know, today is April 3rd. It happens to be the 55th anniversary of Martin Luther King's final speech. He'd taken ill that day. He had a high fever running, so he cancelled his appearance at the gathering that night on April 3rd. But his staff called him up, and they said 'You've got to come. You have to be here. The garbage workers and their families and the people from the churches, they need to hear you. They want to hear you. They've got to hear you.'

So he went, and his most famous lines reverberate till this day.
I've been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I've seen it. 'Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord.'

And Mary saw it too. She lets down her hair, massages his feet, drying them. For how long did she not wash her hair, carrying within it there the aroma and fragrance of his presence and love. How long? How do you conclude an evening like that? What do people say to each other?
I don't know--but this meal [gesturing to the altar] keeps talking about that meal, and revealing the meaning of the meals we share.

And in these impossibly painful, ridiculous times, God keeps saying to us,
'Forget about the past. Yes, I want to do something new with you.'

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.