



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 25, 2007 Do You Not Perceive It

The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Isaiah 43:16-21

¹⁶Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

What were we to make of the weather last weekend? Temperatures plunging to the 20's, howling winds driving heavy snows, a Sunday winterscape of walkways piled with snow and ice. If we hadn't

known any better we'd have been picking up another season's supply of rock salt, ordering another cord of fire wood, and deferring indefinitely any plans to see Al Gore's movie on global warming. Winter was giving every sign of hanging on forever.

But, of course, we did know better. Seasoned New Englanders know all about the ambiguities of late March and April. As Robert Frost wrote from a bit farther north,

*The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March.*

Two Tramps in Mud Time (1936)¹

Late March days always bring their lingering marks of wintry death, decay, and despair as well as their harbingers of new life, new creation, and new hope. But we were not fooled. For we have learned to look more deeply into the rhythms of the seasons. Tagging along behind a father repairing the fence lines or a mother raking out the perennial garden, or a grandma resetting the blue bird house, we learned to see the signs of spring and to read them well. So, even as the snow was flying, even as the wind was whipping we knew winter was in its last throes.

We spy the yellow and purple crocus peeking up through the snow. Green daffodil tips struggling through the ice. Fuzzy star magnolia buds just beginning to swell and crack open. Purple skunk cabbage scrolls unfolding in the marsh puddles. An improbably plump robin flitting along snowy boughs. We see the signs and our steps lighten, our shoulders relax, and our dispositions brighten. The long, cold, dark New England winter is ending and the world is turning inexorably to spring. Inexorably. As Swinburne

wrote, *And frosts are slain and flowers begotten, And in green underwood and cover, Blossom by blossom the spring begins.*²

The spring begins. That's the very first thing John wants us to know in today's Gospel reading. He writes, "six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany." Six days before the Passover, Jesus came. It's spring in Israel.³

Then as now, there as here, the seasonal signs must have been ambiguous. Blasts of cold, desert wind and pelting freezing rain all mixed up with hints of warmth when the breeze died and the sun came out. But for those with eyes to see, for those who could read the signs well, the promise of spring's new creation was sure. Spring lambs skittering across lush green pastures, boughs of white and yellow blossoms waving in the olive groves, fresh water coursing through the wadis again. Blossom by blossom, the spring begins.⁴

John wants us to know that it's spring in Israel, but, more importantly, John wants us to know that there's a spiritual spring for all humanity, for all the world, for all Creation as well.⁵ Like its meteorological counterpart, this spiritual spring is also marked by ambiguity. Jesus' dinner with Lazarus, Martha and Mary is hedged all around with wintry death, decay and despair. We've just come from Lazarus' tomb, redolent with the stench of death, pausing only to overhear the Pharisees plotting to execute Jesus. We'll leave the dinner and turn to Palm Sunday and the events grinding toward Golgotha, pausing only to overhear the Pharisees decide to kill Lazarus as well. Themes of death and betrayal even break into the little dinner itself, for there is no way to understand Mary's anointing Jesus' feet except as a burial preparation, and a grumbling Judas foreshadows his sell out at Gethsemane.

Viewed with ordinary human sight, seen from an everyday human perspective, it is a wintry scene indeed. The world is grinding along as it always has: entrenched powers sloughing off starry-eyed dreamers, self-interest masquerading as righteousness, little people leading half-lived lives sliding helplessly toward the final indignities of death. But for those with spiritual sight, for those with a divine perspective, John's scene glistens with the new life of a spiritual spring. "*Behold,*" Isaiah had heard God say,

¹⁸*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

"Do you not perceive it?" Do you not see it? Grasp it? Know it? That's what today's Gospel lesson is about. It's what much of John's Gospel is about. John's Gospel opens with the proclamation that "no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Jesus proclaims that he came into this world, "so that those who do not see may see".⁶ John announces in his first letter, "We declare to you . . . what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life."⁷

John writes his Gospel, John recounts today's story, so that we, too, may see the new thing God is doing through Jesus, the new spring Jesus is ushering into a winter-weary world.⁸ John writes so that we may have eyes to see under, behind and through the wintry mantle still blanketing our world, the icy chill still cramping our communities, the leaden skies still shadowing our lives all the way down to the shoots of new life emerging out of death, the tendrils of new creation spiraling up out of decay, the sprigs of new hope breaking through the ice of despair. Blossom by blossom, the spring begins. Do you not perceive it?

Mary saw it. She knew how to read well the signs of spring. Mary saw the spring in the new life coursing through her brother Lazarus as he laughed alongside her at supper. Mary saw the spring in the self-giving love of Jesus, who raised her brother from death even though it assured his own crucifixion. Mary saw the spring in Christ's majestic assurance in the face of his own death.

Mary saw the signs of spring and she responded. We can only imagine the gratitude, love and praise that welled up inside Mary as she counted her blessings at that table. Her dead brother had been raised. Her mourning had been turned into rejoicing. Her broken family had been healed and preserved. God's love had broken winter's grip on her home forever. And, as Mary's heart swelled, she responded with the same self-giving love she had seen modeled by Jesus.

In a scene of heart-aching tenderness, Mary suddenly slides away from the table to fetch her most valuable

material possession, an earthen jar of pure nard costing a year's wages. Slipping to her knees, she breaks the jar and pours the perfume out on Jesus' feet. Loosing her long hair, she humbles herself, wiping her savior's feet with her locks.

Where Jesus had sacrificed his life for her brother's, Mary sacrifices her dignity and virtue to serve her new Lord. For only a slave would clean feet, and no woman of virtue would loose her hair except for her husband. And as self-giving love inspired self-giving love, John writes that the whole house was filled with the fragrance. The stench of death has been aired out by a spring breeze of new life and fresh love.

You might say that as Mary recognized God in Jesus she responded with love, but you might also say that as Mary responded with love she recognized God in Jesus. Blossom by blossom, the spring begins. Do you not perceive it?

And so the great cycle continues down to today. Wherever spiritual eyes catch a glimpse of God's spring - wherever self-giving love responds to self-giving love, life triumphs over death, new creation triumphs over decay, and new hope triumphs over despair.⁹

You will not be surprised to learn that our Latino brothers and sisters at the Bethesda church poured themselves out in love for our YG mission fish in Chicago. They welcomed us with signs at the airport, they waited for us with signs and hugs on their street corner, they wrote the kids personal notes of love and encouragement at the end of every work day, they cooked a different nationality's meal for the kids lunch every day, they welcomed the fish into their homes for home-cooked dinners, and they threw a feast at the end of the week with families bringing their favorite dishes from their home countries of Guatemala, and Puerto Rico, and El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and Mexico, and Ecuador, and Venezuela.

And you will not be surprised that our 110 mission fish poured themselves out in love for our brothers and sisters at Bethesda - spending their spring vacation sleeping on a drafty gym floor, struggling up at 6:30 each morning for a long day of manual labor, working through a spreading stomach bug.

We ended our week, as is our custom, with a joint worship service, their salsa band and our worship teaming combining as both communities praised God in English and in Spanish. Then our kids said their thank you's and good bye's, our junion deacon Kim Case's eyes glistening as she reached out her arms and told Bethesda that she had come to love every single one of them. And then Pastor David and Pastora Ruth took the stage with their own thank you's and good bye's. Finally, Pastor David said he did not have the words to express the fullness of his heart, and he asked their soloist, Joann to come forward.

Joann's voice swelled as she sang our kids a song of thanksgiving, and then one by one the Bethesda folks began streaming up out of their chairs to join her in the refrain, 140 parishioners on the risers serenading our kids. 4 year olds holding their mothers hands, 80 year olds with their arms around their grandchildren. Folks who knew English, folks just doing the best they could in a broken second language. Arms linked as they swayed back and forth.

Again and again they sang the beautiful refrain:
*Thank you for giving to the Lord,
I am a life that was changed.*

And then our kids started streaming forward out of their seats. First one, and then another, until there were 110 of us, standing just before our Latino brothers and sisters, arms linked and swaying back and forth to the music. And as their song ended, they started blowing kisses to us, and we started blowing kisses to them, and they all started to cry and we all started to cry, and then we all fell into each others arms, weeping and thanking God for bringing us together.

Blossom by blossom, the spring begins. Do you not perceive it? **Amen.**

1 *Anthology of American Poetry* ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 102.

2 Algernon Charles Swineburn, *Atalanta in Calydon and Lyrical Poems* ed. William Sharp (Chestnut Hill, MA: Adamant Media Corp., 2006) lines 89-96.

3 "The sending of the Redeemer is the eschatological event; it is the turning-point of the ages (3:19; 9:39; etc.; Gal. 4:4)."

Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* vol. 2. trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 6.

4 The voice of Jesus says in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological/poetic commentary on John *Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Paulist, 1980); "All the world's living and dying, taken together, are one great death, and it is this death that I awaken to life," (77).

5 Consider the parallel imagery between winter/spring and darkness/light. Bultmann trades on the latter: "Before the light's coming the whole "world" is in darkness, in death, but by the light's coming the question is put to man whether he chooses to remain in darkness, in death. By sending His Son into the world God put the world, so to say, in the balance: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin" (15:22). Man cannot act otherwise than as what he is, but in the Revealer's call there opens up to him the possibility of *being* otherwise than he was. He can exchange his Whence, his origin, his essence, for another; he can "be born again" (3:1ff) and thus attain to his true being. In his decision between faith and un-faith a man's being definitively constitutes itself, and from then on his Whence becomes clear," (Bultmann, 25).

6 John 9.39.

7 1 John 1.1.

8 Rudolf Bultmann gets at this in various ways. He explains the consequences of faith for the way one views and lives the rest of life:

The demand for faith, therefore, is the demand that the world surrender the understanding it has had of itself hitherto—that it let the whole structure of its security which it has erected in presumptuous independence of the Creator fall to ruins. The inner unity of this demand with Paul's concept of faith is clear in spite of its orientation against other antitheses than his. Faith is turning away from the world, the act of desecularization, the surrender of all seeming security and every pretense, the willingness to live by the strength of the invisible and uncontrollable. It means accepting completely different standards as to what is to be called death and what life. It means accepting the life that Jesus gives and is—a life that from the world's point of view cannot even be proved to exist. (75). He also talks about what revelation does to the way we understand the world. God's revelation is the spring breaking into our winter, that which enables the life that is life.

The Revelation is represented as the shattering and negating of all human self-assertion and all human norms and evaluations. And, precisely by virtue of being such negation, the Revelation is the affirmation and fulfillment of human longing for life, for true reality. (67-8)

9 See the Easter sermon, Skip Masback, "So What?" April 8, 2007.