

Will We Love In New Extravagant Ways?

Fellow embodyers, fellow manifesters of the love of God, on this fifth Sunday in Lent, we offer each other the gift of presence as we individually and collectively seek to sense the Spirit calling us toward our next faithful steps. And as we move further along our Lenten journey today, I invite you to wonder with me, **will we love in new extravagant ways?** Please pray with me:

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God; guide us in our quest to follow the radically loving way of Jesus. Increase our awareness of your deep love and peace embracing us at all times. As you work within and among us, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends old and new, our scripture texts for this morning hold challenges for each of us if we're open to receiving them. We heard these words at the center of the reading from the prophet Isaiah:

*“Forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago!
Look, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth—can't you see it?”*

Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey has written this about the original audience to whom Isaiah spoke and wrote with such fervor. As Mary Maren stated when introducing the scripture reading, Isaiah's people were in forced exile in a strange land. I hope we are holding the people of Ukraine in our hearts as we hear this lesson today. Matthews Huey writes this:

“For Israel, exile was being lost, homesick, divided, unmoored, rootless except for memory. It must have been hard to resist the temptation to settle down, fit in, sell out, and forget the story that had held them together. After all, what good had all that done them?”

Unto that heartache and doubt stepped a poet-prophet to sing a new song about ancient things, and the new thing that the God of old was about to do.” (Sermon Seeds – Year C) Those were words from Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey.

Isaiah’s encouragement to “*forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago*” can be off-putting or perhaps overwhelming, yet also potentially liberating. For the people of Israel, much of the ancient and recent past had been very difficult. They were enslaved, then freed, wandered for many years, then settled, and now had been captured again and forced into exile in a strange land. Yet the events of the past were known, familiar. I wonder if the challenge Isaiah intended to offer was to not get stuck in reliving past events that could not be changed but rather to recognize the presence of the same living God whose love and justice made pathways through their past challenges as continuing to accompany them in the present moment. Might this wisdom apply to your personal life today? Might it apply to our communal life as a congregation?

*“Look, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth—can’t you see it?”*

The love of God within and among us will always sense new life springing forth even as aspects of our beings are frustrated, tired and discouraged by unexpected or sharp curves appearing in our winding paths.

The God of Isaiah has been with People’s Congregational Church from our birth 106 years ago, when an ecumenical welcoming church in Bayport (which was called South Stillwater at that time) was growing at a rate that motivated them to become associated with a denomination. We chose the Congregational Society. The God of Isaiah has been with our congregation through decades of bold ministry endeavors; through times of decline, loss and pain; and through times of growth and expansion.

And the God of Isaiah is with us today as we welcome three new members to join us on the journey as we pursue continued growth, development and ever more abundant life.

We must remain radically open to the growing pains of growth and change in order to continue offering a vital space of welcome, worship, faith development and outreach.

Last spring, I shared during one of our worship services a reading that has been very influential in both my private life and my public life as an outdoor ministry professional, a public-school teacher, a pastor. It is called "Fear of Transformation" by twentieth century North American psychologist, author and teacher, Danaan Parry. He was appreciated internationally for his work in conflict resolution and particularly for his approach and practice of seeing the humanity in an enemy. I will share an abridged version of the reading this morning. I invite you to welcome these words to speak to your experience of our communal moment of growth as a congregation or to a transition in your private life. "Fear of Transformation," by Danaan Parry.

"Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments in my life, I'm hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I'm in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the right answers. But once in a while, as I'm... swinging along, I look ahead of me into the distance, and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It's empty, and I know... that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me...

I know that, for me to grow, I must release my grip on the present, well known bar to move to the new one. Each time it happens to me, I hope... I pray... that I won't have to grab the new one.

But in my knowing place I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar, and for some moment in time hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new bar...Perhaps this is the essence of... the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow, to keep hanging onto that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives.

I have noticed that... this transition zone is looked upon as a "no-thing", a no-place between places. Sure the old trapeze-bar was real, and that new one coming towards me, I hope that's real too. But the void in between? That's just a scary, confusing, disorienting "nowhere" that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible. What a waste!... the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored... with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out-of-control that can... accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives."

Those are words from the late Danaan Parry. On what trapeze bar are you or we swinging along? And what trapeze bar is coming to get you, coming to get us? And will we be fully, graciously present in the transitional spaces in our lives.

I don't quite agree with Isaiah that we would do well to "*Forget the events of the past, ignore the things of long ago!*" When you do find ourselves reminiscing about the past, I encourage us to consciously choose to dwell only on those events and experiences which have built us into the resilient persons we are – both in our private lives and as members and friends of People's Church. Try noticing how God is empowering you today in ways God has always empowered you.

Now that we've let Isaiah speak to us, let's spend a moment with the narrative from the gospel of John.

We heard, *“Why wasn't this ointment sold? It could have brought a year's wages, and the money been given to poor people!” Judas didn't say this because he was concerned for poor people, but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the common fund and would help himself to it. Jesus replied, ‘Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You have poor people with you always. But you won't always have me.’”*

To be frank, I don't appreciate the aggressive judgment of Judas by either the author or editor of the gospel of John. None of us knows the thoughts of another's heart. The author or editor took a guess at Judas' motive for his statement because they wanted to paint a particular image of Judas as a villain. The gospel of John was first written down many decades after the deaths of Judas and Jesus. Some in the audience within the gospel story (that is, the crowd of disciples that traveled with Jesus) may have known of incidents of Judas stealing from the common pot. But they did not yet know that Judas would betray Jesus in Jesus' final days. We could learn a lesson from the narrator's commentary. We might ask ourselves if there is someone about whom we have absolutely decided our opinion? To whom have not been willing to give a second chance after first impressions have been made? About whom do you perpetuate your distaste by professing it to others? Is any good created by our judgments and our sharing of our judgments?

How does Jesus respond to Judas' vehement reaction to so much costly ointment being poured out on Jesus' feet instead of conserved for money-saving and money-distribution purposes?

“Jesus replied, ‘Leave her alone. She did this in preparation for my burial. You have poor people with you always. But you won't always have me.’” Jesus was known for paying close attention to those around him. He seemed to sense and appreciate Mary's love and made space for her expression of love.

I've read a delightful quote about this scriptural moment from a 20th century British moral philosopher named Bernard Williams. He simply wrote, "*An extravagance is something that your spirit thinks is a necessity.*" "*An extravagance is something that your spirit thinks is a necessity.*" When the spirit of love compels us toward action, watch out world! We have the power to act in radical, justice-seeking, love-lavishing ways.

In his book *Gifts of The Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and Other Wanderers)*, Eric Elnes shares words from another writer that seem to speak to the behaviors of love-lavishing Mary and open-hearted Jesus. Elnes writes, "[A man named] David Whyte teaches that we might "*seek a place where the world around us can call forth something deep from the world within us in a way that points toward our highest identity... accept an identity only in situations or circumstances that call forth the very best in you.*"

Let's hear that again: "*[S]eek a place where the world around us can call forth something deep from the world within us in a way that points toward our highest identity... accept an identity only in situations or circumstances that call forth the very best in you.*"

Today and in the coming days, may we welcome Judas and Mary and Jesus to teach us about attuning ourselves both to the needs of the outside world and to the deep callings of our inner world – so that we might enact God's love in new extravagant ways. Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church | Bayport, MN
April 3, 2022 (New Members Sunday, Lent 5)
Isaiah 43:16-21, John 12:1-8