

LENT: JOURNEYING TO THE CROSS

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010

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

Influencing God?

The story of Mary of Bethany washing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, as recorded in John's Gospel, is a familiar text, particularly during the season of Lent because of the story's association with Jesus' impending death. Similar accounts are recorded in the Gospels according to Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:3-9) in the New Testament, although the woman in these two accounts is unnamed. At the end of the story in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9, *NRSV*). For John, the whole episode is captured in one verse, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair" (John 12:3a, *NRSV*).

To the dismay of Judas, he felt Mary was wasting a lot of money – probably the annual income for a laborer – by washing Jesus' feet with this costly perfume. The setting in John's Gospel, however, is in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary during a dinner party that they were having for Jesus. Supposedly, Mary could do what she wanted with her possessions in her home at a party she was hosting! The dinner party is important for the Gospel according to John because it follows closely the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11. An event that remarkable deserves a party!

Mary's actions at the party are unprecedented, and according to the disciple's reaction, not received very well. Jesus, on the other hand, was overwhelmed. In the previous chapter, when Jesus arrived at Lazarus' tomb, it was Mary who ran to Jesus and "knelt at his feet;" and "when Jesus saw her weeping...he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:32, 33, *NRSV*).

Here again, at the home of his friends, Jesus is moved by Mary, but the influence of her action on him is not fully evidenced until the next chapter in John. There, Jesus washes the disciples' feet and says, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:12b-15, *NRSV*).

Jesus' example of humility would have undoubtedly reminded the disciples of Mary's loving act in the previous chapter. It is rare to find anyone in the Gospels that had as much impact on Jesus as Mary did in these three chapters in John.

Are we able to influence God? That's a theologically loaded question, but in response to the witness of Mary of Bethany, it's a question worth asking – especially during Lent. In our acts of fasting and letting go, how does that touch God? How are our prayers heard and answered? What do our prayers do? As we ask our questions and pray our prayers, may our song echo the psalmist, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy” (Psalms 126:5, *NRSV*).

This week's Reflection was prepared by the Rev. K. Jason Coker, an ordained minister with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Connecticut. Visit www.wiltonbaptist.org to learn more about the ministries of Wilton Baptist Church.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Bangladesh – With thanks to God for the warm response to efforts at organizing youth festivals held in Dhaka and Khulna, to follow-up programs, and to the *Mission Bangladesh* festival designed to encourage people to get involved in mission, and with prayers that the goal of recruiting 20,000 Bangladeshi missionaries will be met; **Sri Lanka** – With thanks for answered prayers and for God's grace in bringing an end to the war, and with prayers for comfort and provision for the many grief-stricken people who have lost loved ones, homes, and livelihood, and with prayers for events being planned for clergy of all denominations in observance of the *Year for Priests*; **Myanmar** – With thanks to God for the ability to provide Bibles and humanitarian aid to survivors of Cyclone Nargis and that, through this, many have come to know God, and with prayers for the transformation of the country and that a truly democratic society will be established with new openings for the Gospel; **Maldives** – With prayers for Bible work in this country.

Activity Corner: “A New Thing”

Supplies needed: Bible; 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper (assorted colors); pens or pencils; markers; scissors; used greeting cards; glue or paste; small potted plants or small bouquets of flowers (optional).

Read together Isaiah 43:16-21. Verses 16 and 17 allude to the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 14); in the passage from Isaiah, the verses are meant to serve as a reminder of the LORD's promise of a “new” exodus when the Israelites' exile in Babylon will end and the people will be able to return home. Compare Isaiah 43:16-21 with Isaiah 35:1-10. What “new things” are described in these two passages? Encourage a discussion of what “new things” are taking place in our world today. For example, with the approach of spring, how does God renew creation? Invite everyone to create a card for someone who is homebound or in a hospital or nursing home. Decorate the front panel with the front of a used greeting card (or a picture can be drawn that illustrates some of the images in Isaiah 43:16-21). On the inside of the card, copy Isaiah 43:19a. Deliver the cards, along with small potted plants or flowers (optional) to a local hospital or nursing home or to people in the community who are homebound.