

Lent 5C, March 21, 2010

Lections: Is. 43:16-21; Ps. 126; Phil. 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany...there they gave a dinner for him.

We had a dinner here on Thursday evening; it too was before Passover (which is on March 30th this year) and more followers of Jesus were in our downstairs hall. Children in an unusual patience before the start of the meal watched a rabbi move rhythmically as he prayed; all joined him as he sang songs in Hebrew that we didn't know – we hummed along as best we could. And the questions begun by children were extended during the meal...what does this mean? What are you wearing? Why is there an orange on the Seder plate?

The Seder looks to the past, to memory, to the time when captivity ended and God is praised for all the marvelous deliverances and grace-filled new territories. The powerful "it would have been sufficient" dayenu blesses God for each step of the journey.

We used the 1969 Freedom Seder which includes the voices of additional oppressed groups where God's help was key to moving ahead: the voices of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, Gandhi; plans for next year are to include the words of women and Aborigines. The people of faith in diverse communities find their hope in a release from bondage. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was to have celebrated the Passover meal with Abraham Heschel's family but it was not to be – he was killed 6 days before the Passover in 1968. The Freedom Seder held in Washington the following year, included his words and drew 800 people that night – Jews and Christians, blacks and whites. This powerful liturgy leans both backward and forward in time.

Today's gospel leans toward next week, toward foot washing, tenderness, betrayal and so much more of the journey. And all of the texts lean backward too. The psalm states that tears shed as the movement begins will eventually lead to joy; but it began in captivity; it began in exile. Even Paul acknowledges loss as he walks in faith in Jesus. Sometimes it is just hard and complicated.

The prophet Isaiah tells the people of God to forget the former things because God is doing a new thing. Welcoming the new activity of God will depend on not framing it or defining it based on the past – it may be radically reshaped. "Always the same God," says David Bartlett in Feasting on the Word," but not always in the same way."

Our past and our present can hinder our ability to see the future of God and move into it. We are invited to leave our exiles and to trust God who has many new things in store for us. God specializes in making pathways through barriers, making not just a highway in the desert but also filling the barren landscape with flowing water. But sometimes we are just not inclined to lean in new ways.

Lent is the time for following, for placing ourselves yet again in the story of Jesus. During Lent we are asked for fresh decision making about our reliance on God – the

church calls it a time for repentance, for turning again to the God who may also want to do a new thing in us. This invitation to decision time gives us a chance to be open to new life, to recognize that our previous choices may have left us weary and unsatisfied. And perhaps the world is weary and unsatisfied too. “The reality is there is no easy or convenient passage from our previous life to a new life in the gospel. We are faced with an embrace of suffering that comes with obedience that comes when our faith life is at odd with the dominant social values.”¹

We don't know much about the whole evening at the house in Bethany. We know that Jesus was a beloved friend of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Jesus had pulled Lazarus from death into life but that action would be death dealing for Jesus for the authorities had decided to put both of them to death. Perhaps Jesus spoke about the danger over dinner – we don't know. Mary and Martha are silent but Judas complains. Mary had anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment. Perhaps it had been put aside for Lazarus and not used; perhaps Mary knew what was coming. Her extravagant generosity, her intimate loving gesture offends Judas; he challenges her perhaps because her love of Jesus was an offense to him. He mentions the poor and Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, ‘the poor will always be with you but you will not always have me.’ People have struggled with this text as we struggle with how to spend our own resources – how much for this building? How much for the poor? Mary embraces the suffering Jesus.

Seldom, though, are we as generous as Mary; seldom are we willing to be that risky. The dominant social values affect how we live – our continuous overconsumption of food and goods, our bills and retirement, our own families and friends. Counting the cost is one thing Mary didn't do and Judas is offended; Jesus will not count the cost either and that is a challenge.

On Friday evening some 400 people gathered to hear Shane Claiborne a young Christian guy from Philadelphia who lives in intentional Christian community; he looks hard at the gospel and the dominant culture and shares his story; you can find some of it on Youtube. For me his most powerful witness came through the challenges heard by the young people I know – does following Jesus really look like this? God is passing through neighborhoods, cities and people and reconfiguring the neighborhoods. It even smells different – costly, precious, poured out on the feet and paths of those who are willing to walk there.

At 10 am this morning we end with the litany of resistance, the final prayer from Friday night; at 8 am we end with a challenge; God is about to do a new thing; what are you/we going to do about it?

Amen+
The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

¹ Brueggeman, Walter, in *Sojourners*, March, 2010

