

**March 19, 2010**

What a long forty days and forty nights we are in the middle of. Here we are on the fifth Sunday of Lent: Palm Sunday comes next, ushering in Holy Week when we will walk together the final days of our Lord's life before his crucifixion. It has been a long, long Lent. We have seen earthquakes, and aftershocks; devastation and death. We have suffered our own poignant losses here in our own parish family. We've made it through blizzards, and struggled through life after a hurricane, right here in Stamford. And we've done all this while the ground under our feet has literally been shifting. It has been a long Lent of feeling almost powerless at times – literally powerless for the past week! - but I believe it has in fact strengthened us.

Now that hopefully most of us have made the return to the comforting rhythms of normal daily life, we find that we have come through these challenges with new bonds: stronger friendships with those who have shared their homes and showers; stronger kinship with our brothers and sisters in Haiti, and with fellow missionaries throughout Fairfield County in the efforts to bring aid. We've checked on each other through blizzards; we've kept vigil with one another through the darkest times. St. John's is an even stronger parish family for all these challenges, and this strength will hold up to the challenges ahead. New focus, new space, new leadership: these are the decisions at hand, for the future of your church. But for this moment, let's just savor the relief of "ordinary life" back to normal after the storms of this very long Lent.

Our Gospel account brings us to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus: Jesus' friends. It is to their home that our Lord often went for refuge and refreshment - to feel ordinary and to rest among friends, to be comfortable, to retreat from the press of the world. This day the friends are joined by the disciples, and gathered around the table, they all savor the ordinary joys of sharing a meal together. But what an extraordinary event they are celebrating: the raising from the dead of Lazarus! Only Mary is clear and present and strong enough to acknowledge the truth that has been revealed: that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, reclining right there with them at table. He has raised the dead up out of the reeking tomb, and has explained that he himself will be killed, and laid in the tomb, only to rise again himself! Mary is the only one in this gathering who gets it. And so she gives the most poignant and extravagant offering she can give: a pound of pure precious nard. And instead of saving it for his burial, she anoints him with it now. What a clear way

to say that she understands what Jesus is preparing himself for. What a blessing for him to receive her gift, her acknowledgement, and her tenderness. It comforts me to think of how Mary's gift must have comforted him.

Mary's gift reminds us to be present to our loved ones, and to acknowledge how precious they are – to not waste an opportunity to show them that we get who they are: beautiful and unique and beloved. Mary teaches us to be present to each other, and to have the courage to show it.

Mary shows us how to be strong enough to bear the truth, and to express this with love. Where in your life is it hard to bear the truth? Where in your life is it easier to pretend that all is ordinary, that there is nothing extraordinary in your midst? Can we lift the veils of everyday life to actually see how irreplaceable and precious our loved ones are to us? This is the gift of presence. Mary of Bethany always teaches us about this gift – we remember Luke's account of Mary sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to him, to be present to his teaching, rather than rush around serving dinner, knowing she'd have to bear the brunt of her sister's anger. Mary always chose to practice presence with Jesus, and she teaches this again today: she reminds us that life is short.

With all the harsh reminders we've suffered through this long Lent still fresh in our minds, we might not think we need any reminders that life is short, but we do need this one today. Jesus reminded his disciples on this day that, "...*you will not always have me.*" We will not always have this chance to give our attention and our presence to those we love: we will not always have them.

Living in appreciation of the present is one of the most advanced spiritual disciplines to be mastered in any religious tradition. It takes constant mindfulness to be present; Mary of Bethany and Jesus our Lord teach us about this today. It is somehow so much easier to get lost in the past, or caught up in the future, that we miss the present. And the present moment is really all we have. I love that bumper sticker that says, "Live every moment knowing it is a gift: that's why we call it "the present."

We may not be able to master living every moment in the present, but we can choose to focus on it this fifth week of Lent. We can remember Mary, pouring out her most precious offering to Jesus, and we can consider what pure nard, what precious, protected gift, could we pour out for our loved ones, now? Rather than holding back for another day, what gesture of extravagant acknowledgement could we offer?

We are reminded to be present today, and we are reminded that life is precious and short. This is a truth that haunts anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one, and so in closing, I offer you this blessing, which resonates deeply with our lessons. Taken from the work of Henri Frederic Amiel, it is the Dean's blessing, and it strengthened me every day within the sweet ordinary routine of seminary chapel life, during my three extraordinary years there. I offer it to you for your strengthening.

“Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make this earthly pilgrimage with us.

So be swift to love. Make haste to do kindness. Shower abundant hospitality on friend and stranger. Walk in love, that you may know the path of mercy and peace.

And may the blessing of The One

Who came to us unbidden;

Who for our lives was broken;

And in whose Spirit we are guided into wholeness and holiness of life,

Be with you, and remain in you and those you love, this day and always.”

Amen.

The Rev. Julia Fritts

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