

ISAIAH 43:16-21 (p. 590)

APRIL 3, 2022

JOHN 12:1-10 (p. 872)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We are here Lord, to Praise you and Worship you. We've come to see you, and understand you for who you really are. And then to share that truth with the entire world. So, we ask you now to open our eyes that we might see. And then, like Mary, to Glorify you with all that we say and do. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

"EXTRAVAGANCE!"

Have you ever heard something completely out of the blue that immediately shifted your focus? You were in the middle of a thought maybe, when a snippet of a conversation sort of wafted to your ears, causing you stop and think in a totally different way. Just a sentence really, or maybe two, but a light suddenly went on in your head.

I was reading Isaiah this week, preparing for today's lesson. The Prophet was talking about God's repeated Mercy, His Faithfulness and constant Grace, His Extravagant Love! "I formed you," says the Lord! "I created you! And I have redeemed you! I have called you by name, out from the world!" "Consider all that I have done for you," says the Lord! And consider your response, or lack thereof! There is no gratitude in your heart! You don't Worship me! Your Praise is sporadic at best! You are constantly running after worldly idols, constantly reaching for worldly things!

Isaiah, on behalf of the Lord, was reminding God's People of the plagues during the Exodus, in order to get Pharaoh's attention. The parting of the waters of the Red Sea, in order to rescue His people. The destroying of the Egyptian armies even. He points to the provision of food and water in the Wilderness. Safe passage through that Wilderness and into the Promised Land. So, I was thinking, "WOW! GO GOD!" When suddenly, from across the room, the guy on the television said, "In order to Do Good, you have to Do Something". That struck me! It struck me as Truth! And I could hear the Truth in Isaiah's words. God has certainly "Done Something", right? A lot of "Somethings", in fact, which is the Prophet's point! But then I started thinking about the Church, and our response, or lack thereof.

"In order to do good, you have to do something!" "Good", is not simply the absence of "Bad". Therefore, "Doing Good, is not simply refraining from "Doing Bad". Or, "Doing Wrong"! Doing good is not a passive thing, not in any way! The operative word is "doing", right? Which is a verb, I believe, or an adverb, or an adverbial phrase! I was never very good at English. But it's an action-word, right, or an action thought? "In order to do good, you have to do something!"

Isaiah is telling us to stop and consider all the things that God has done for us. For Creation even. And it's a pretty impressive list! Our God rescues us from captivity. Heals us, physically and mentally and spiritually. Delivers us from bondage, including the bondage of Sin. And guides us into the Promised Land. Our God walks with us in the Wilderness, and provides sustenance along the way.

“Water in the desert,” says Isaiah, “streams in the wilderness”! Our God “provides drink to the people who He has formed into community”! We are Blessed! Clearly! As God’s people, we have been given so much! And if you doubt that, writes the Prophet, then take an honest assessment of your own life. Look at it, objectively. Consider what you have, versus what you deserve. Then ask yourself, “why”!

Why am I Blessed? Why are we Blessed? Why does God do so much for us? Why does God take care of us? I mean, it’s easy to see that He has formed us into a people, called us together as the Church. But to what end? What’s the point? Why? Consider all the books on that subject, the DVDs, the Conferences and such. What is it that they say? What do you hear in Scripture? “In order to do good, you have to do something”! So, what’s our role? How are we supposed to respond to God’s Extravagance?

Isaiah wrote in the 7th Century B. C. This particular section is called an “Oracle of Salvation” by the Scholars, and addresses God’s “future” Providence. Christians and Jews understand it as a Messianic Promise. But in order for Isaiah to speak to that Promise, he begins by reminding us of God’s hand in the past. In fact, he highlights the single biggest event in the collective history of the Hebrew People, the Exodus from Egypt. That was a defining moment! A Salvation Event! The Lord freed His Chosen from captivity—rescued them from their enemies—provided safe passage through the chaos, through the turbulent waves of the Red Sea! God nurtured His people, and cared for them as they wandered in the Wilderness! And then, as they entered the Promise Land!

The Prophet recites the amazing narrative of their collective lives, the unfailing, steadfast love God showered upon them! The extravagant care and compassion shown to a stubborn and selfish people! It's something we need to be reminded of as well, because it certainly applies! God is with us, and for us! He has done a lot! A lot of Good! And promises to do even more!

But I keep coming back to "Why". Have you ever asked yourself that? If God is God, then why gather people together out of the world for Himself? Why call Abraham and his family, way back in Genesis, and say, "Your people will be my people. And I will be your God"? Why save Noah and his family from the flood? Why wrestle with Jacob, and then rename him Israel, "he who wrestles with God," setting his Family Line apart as special?

Why would God take the time, or make the effort to form us into a people, call us together as the Church? Why would God provide all that we need, life and health, and give us Laws in order to make it easier? Why would Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty create a way for us to be saved from death? What's the point? Why spend so much time and energy guiding us, and correcting us, and keeping our feet on the right path? Why, as the Psalmist so eloquently puts it, "is God even mindful of us"? He is God, remember, and we are not!

I understand the Flood! Believe me! I can see why God would destroy us! Our sinful nature is pretty clear! And I understand why God would scatter our arrogant selves, far and wide at Babel! I've been around people all my life! I can easily see our shortcomings! What I don't understand—or more accurately, what I sometimes forget—is why the Lord would Bless us so! And keep reaching out to us! And continue to love us in all the vast and amazing ways that He does, even when we are such a rebellious and stubborn lot!

Have you ever considered that? Do you know the answer? It's actually tucked away in the second half of the very last verse of today's lesson from Isaiah, verse twenty-one if you care to look it up, or underline it. The Lord, through the Prophet says, "I make a way for my people. I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland." "I give drink to my people, my Chosen, the people that I formed for myself," WAIT FOR IT, "that they may proclaim my Praise"!

"That they may proclaim my praise"! I've called them, and take care of them, so that they may Worship me, so that they will make my Presence known in the world. I sustain my Chosen so that they will boldly declare that I am God—boldly declare that I am their God. Right here, is our purpose folks, the reason for the Church! As Followers of Jesus Christ, we are to proclaim God's Praise! "In order to do good, you have to do something! And right here is our something! Maybe I should have titled this sermon "Doing Church"?"

By the way, this isn't a new thought. Once you notice the theme, you'll see it repeated over and over in Scripture! All of the plagues in Egypt, for instance, were "so that they will know that I am God" (Exodus 6:7), "then you will know that I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 7:5), "the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 7:17), "by this you will know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 8:22, 9:16, 10:2, 11:7, 12:24, 13:14). The entire Exodus has a solitary purpose.

Moses at the Burning Bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna and quail in the desert, the tabernacle with all of its accouterments, the Pillar of Smoke by day and the Pillar of Fire by night, are all intended to make God Presence known. Joshua, blowing a trumpet and walking around the walls of Jericho in a circle while they crumbled to the ground, was intended to demonstrate the reality of God. David slaying Goliath, right, Job's trials and tribulations, the calling of Abraham, were all to make God known!

The Babylonian captivity, the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple, the entire history of Israel in fact—in good times and in bad—are all designed to show the world that He is Lord. All of the prophecies, all of Scripture, the very reason that God gathered a people out of the world and unto Himself, is so that the world would know that He is God! And that's just the Old Testament! Consider all the miracles of Jesus in the New! The blind and the lame that were healed, the waves and storms that were calmed, the multitudes that were fed, the little girl raised from the dead! What about a Stable with Wise Men, and Shepherds, and Angels!

Look at the Transfiguration where Jesus, in Glory, talked with Moses and Elijah—or the Cross, where a Roman Centurion stood and proclaimed God’s Glory! Or just sneak a peek into the Empty Tomb! There is a purpose, isn’t there, a divine purpose, a repetitive theme that weaves its way throughout the entire biblical witness! The Gospel, the mission of the Disciples, the purpose of the Church even, are all intended to make God known!

Do you realize that we are even supposed to make God known in the Heavenly Realms? It’s true! Paul says to the Church in Ephesus that God’s intent is “that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the Heavenly Realms”! I am not entirely sure of the depth of what that means! But consider the statement at face value. God’s intent is that the Church demonstrates God’s Wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the Heavenly Realms, to angels and demons, to powers and principalities! That’s our purpose! Clearly! But, is that what we do?

William Barclay says that, “A Saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God”! So, are you a Saint? Do you, does our Church, make it easier for people to believe in God? Because, that’s why we “Do Church”.

Jesus and the Disciples, in our Gospel Lesson, are in the tiny village of Bethany, a mile and a half or so outside of Jerusalem. And I believe they are “Doing Church”. The original language has some subtle nuances that make it a bit difficult to translate. I’m not entirely sure if the Believers are currently at a Board Meeting, or participating in a Pot Luck Dinner. The distinction is somewhat blurred!

It probably doesn't really matter though. Board Meetings often include fellowship, and eating. And Potlucks, quite often, are places where critical Church decisions are made! Besides, in John's Gospel, things are happening on several different levels at the same time. So, let's just peek at what's going on, and maybe see ourselves in the text.

The Faithful are gathered in the home of Mary and Martha, and their beloved brother Lazarus, who, by the way, died about a week ago! And just like Believers today, they are about to share a meal in Jesus' Honor. Now apparently some of the folks have come to serve, in whatever capacity they can. While others have come to simply recline at the table, and hopefully be fed. Still others have gathered, because like Lazarus, they were once dead, at least metaphorically—but now, through Christ, they live again! Can you see why I say they are “Doing Church”?

Martha, the Chair of Congregational Fellowship, is busy in the kitchen preparing the meal. She is setting the table, and counting heads in order to make sure that all the guests get enough to eat. She just emptied the dishwasher from Lunch with Friends, and now is taking the hot rolls out of the oven. Martha and her crew have done the set up, arranged all of the table decorations. Everything looks great! Maybe you can picture it?

But then Martha glances out of the kitchen door and towards the sanctuary. She spies her sister Mary, the Worship Chair, who she thought should have been helping in the kitchen all along. And just then Mary does something extraordinary!

With apparently no thought for the others in the room, Mary disrupts the entire gathering by pouring a whole jar of very expensive perfume all over Jesus' feet! It's completely out of place, don't you think! It's totally extravagant! It's a gross waste of precious resources too, not to mention a mess that someone needs to clean up! And because of it, the sparks really start to fly!

The Gifts and Memorial Chair stands up and says, "Hey, we were saving that for a Christmas gift for the Office Manager. What's the deal?" The Building Chair immediately counters with, "NO! We were going to anoint the basement remodel with that"! Then the Property Chair storms into the room with a bucket and mop and complains about the sticky carpet! The Christian Ed. Chair quickly snatches that bucket and says something about taking the perfume to the nursery, because that place really smells! And then the Financial Trustee, Judas Iscariot, jumps into the fray!

Now again, the Greek is a little confusing. It's not crystal clear if Judas was just the Financial Trustee or the Mission Chair for the group as well. In either case, he points out that this expensive perfume could have easily been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor! He even wonders aloud about the extravagance of buying this stuff in the first place! Wouldn't BACN, or ECHO, or Kid's Hope, or Habitat for Humanity, have been better recipients of these funds? Couldn't these precious resources be directed to the people of Syria, or those in Ukraine? Or to buy turkeys for someone at Thanksgiving?

And the Board Chair, Peter, just may be the most interesting character of all! He doesn't say a word during the entire explosive exchange! He is suspiciously quiet, don't you think? Or maybe conflict avoidant? Can you see why I think they are "Doing Church"?

So, raise your hands. How many of you, the first time you read this story, thought that maybe Judas was not all that far off base? I mean dumping a year's worth of wages in perfume on someone's filthy, mud-caked feet is less than economically frugal, isn't it? Think about it! Would it be smart to take a year's worth of grocery money, and spend it on one Birthday present? Should you take a year of mortgage payments and buy yourself a new lawn mower? Is a pair of shoes worth the money that you have budgeted for all of next year's electric bills? Three hundred Denarii for perfume! It's crazy! Devotion is one thing! I understand that! But what about prudence and good stewardship?

Like I said, in the Gospel of John, things often happen on multiple levels. It's almost as if John wants us to wear bifocals—to see what happens on the surface, but also discern what is taking place at a much deeper level. And from our Post-Resurrection vantage point, that's easier to do. We know, for instance, that Judas' motives are not all that pure—that he is not only a Deceiver, but also a Betrayer. So, we immediately wonder if what he asks is sincere. Besides, John tells us right in the text that Judas is a thief, "he sometimes helped himself to the treasury funds"! But does that fact negate the truth in his question? Could the money have been better spent somewhere else? Should the perfume have been sold and the money given to the poor? That would be "missional" wouldn't it, Social Gospel 101!

John's split-level approach, though, tells us more. Not only do we hear that Judas is a thief, but we notice that this encounter foreshadows Judas stealing Jesus' freedom and ministry. Mary, washing Jesus' feet, foreshadows Jesus washing the Disciples' feet at the Last Supper. This shared meal among the Believers certainly foreshadows a later meal in the Upper Room. And Mary, anointing Jesus, just days before He enters Jerusalem for the very last time, foreshadows His anointing for burial. Things are multi-faceted, and definitely deeper than they appear.

Remember, the Greek word "Christ", and the Hebrew word "Messiah", are titles reserved for kings. They literally mean, "The Anointed One of the God". So, could there be even more going on here than first meets the eye? Like maybe proclaiming who Jesus really is?

What does Lazarus' presence at the meal say? After all, he is the only person in all of Bethany, or anywhere else for that matter, that has died, spent three days in a tomb, and then was raised again! He would have been an extraordinary dinner guest, don't you think? But could it also be that John is foreshadowing again, telling us that the Passion of our Lord is near? Are death and burial and resurrection present at this meal for a reason? Is this a proclamation, maybe, that if anyone is going to move from death to new life, as Lazarus has done, that it will require the Presence of Jesus? And if so, then why is Mary the only one who seems to realize this?

A large crowd of non-believers has come, it says, to see Jesus, but also to see the man that Jesus has raised from the dead! They want to know who this Jesus really is! But even Lazarus, the one to whom Jesus has given new life, fails to bow down and proclaimed His Praise! Only Mary, kneeling at His feet and pouring out all she has, in a fragrant and profound act of devotion, witnessed to the Lord! Only Mary makes God known in the world! Only Mary proclaims His praise!

It really makes you stop and think, doesn't it? We do a lot of great things as a Church, including, or especially helping those in need. All of these though, have a much deeper, a much more profound, a more divine purpose. They are all a response to what God has already done, and to what God promises to do in the future! They are all ways to Praise God, and to make His Presence known in the world!

Our question then is this; Does our life, our actions, each and every one of them, witness to God? Do we make it easier for people to believe in God? Or do we, too often, point to something else? Like ourselves maybe? Pastor David, in an insightful moment last week, talking about Church decline across the United States said, "I think the problem is often too much emphasis on 'Potluck'", and not enough on 'Communion'!" I think he is right! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, you have given us so much, so more than we need, or even ask for, and certainly much more than we deserve! And yet today, we ask for one thing more. Please give us grateful hearts. Make us not so much thankful when it pleases us, but rather, thankful always. Make us not so much thankful when we receive, but rather, thankful when we are able to give. And make us not so much thankful when we are glorified or honored, but rather, when the things that we say and do give Glory and Honor to you. As the song suggests, Lord, make even the “beating of our hearts a rhythmic praise to you”! For to this end, we were created.

Lord, you have searched our hearts just now, and heard our silent requests. You know all that we are, and all that we will one day become. You also know what will make us whole, Lord, and are aware of the deep concerns that are troubling us now. So, each of these Father, we entrust into your loving care, releasing them now, and giving them to you. You also know of the great joys that make us want to sing, Lord. And each of these we lift up before you in celebration as well.

We also lift up some loved ones. Please be with Please shower your grace and blessings upon their lives. Please touch their hearts in powerful ways, and fill their spirits with your own Holy Spirit, even now, as we pray. Please heal and guide all of your people Lord. Nurture and encourage us. And please, enable us to do this for others.

Each of these things we ask with Praise and Adoration Father, in the Name of our Lord and Risen Savior Jesus Christ. And in confidence, through your Holy Spirit, we pray now the way Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...