

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday March 21, 2010**

Lent 5C 2010

*(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):*

In the name of our ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining God:  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are approaching the end of Lent and our readings today are filled with a sense of things being unsettled, of things not being quite what they seem. Change is in the air. You can sense it. You can feel it. Living here in the Islands where the temperature and amount of daylight are pretty constant throughout the year, I've discovered that one becomes attuned to the most subtle changes in the weather. That's what Isaiah and John are describing – a subtle sense that something will change, that things aren't quite what they appear to be.

The author of second Isaiah is with his people in captivity in Babylon. They have been slaves there now for about 50 years and they have endeavored to maintain their culture and religion against great odds. The old generation who knew the culture and faith are dying and the young ones, born into slavery, aren't learning them. As slaves, they have no rights, no justice and they are every day covered with shame. It seems hopeless. But not to all. The prophet Isaiah sensed a change. The God of their ancestors is still their God – even in a foreign land. He tells them in the name of God: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing." God almost sounds giddy with excitement. God then describes a marvelous new path through the wilderness that He will make for his chosen people. While reminiscent of the Exodus, the point is that what God is about to do will so overshadow what God has done in the past, that people will be amazed.

In fact, this happened. During the Exodus the Israelites managed to escape Pharaoh by

the skin of their teeth and few outside of Egypt probably heard about it. However this time, the Persian Empire conquered their Babylonian captors enslaving them – the captors now became the captives! Persian King Cyrus released the Israelites, restoring their temple objects, and told them to rebuild their Temple and apply their own laws. A people were transformed from slavery into a respected nation. That got noticed!

John's Gospel prepares us for the coming events of Holy Week. When God, again, is about to do a new thing. To fully understand it in context, we have to back up a little. Jesus had previously crossed over into Judah to go to his friend Lazarus' tomb where he raised Lazarus from the dead. This caused quite a stir and many Judeans became followers of Jesus. The authorities in Jerusalem were alarmed. They prospered by serving the Roman Empire and wanted no disturbances. Just prior to today's reading in John's gospel, the scribes and the Pharisees called a meeting in the Temple to discuss what should be done about Jesus' rising popularity. They feared a disturbance that would bring the Roman army in and would result in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Caiaphas, the High Priest that year, issued judgment on Jesus. Addressing the Council, he proclaimed: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." The verdict was in; Jesus was to be arrested and killed.

A little later, six days before the Passover, Jesus and his disciples are at table in the house of his dearest friends – the risen Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. The themes of death and resurrection hang over the table. Jesus raised Lazarus from death to life. Now the authorities want to reverse this process and turn life into death by taking the life of the one who gives life.

Into this dinner comes Mary. Her hair flows down past her shoulders. The raising up of her brother has not only filled her with love and gratitude, but has freed her from fear and social

convention. She kneels at Jesus' feet, anoints his feet with most expensive perfumed oil, and wipes them clean with her hair.

The actions are a prediction. Jesus' comment about his body being anointed for burial points to the Cross. Mary's actions points to Jesus' lesson on servant leadership when at the Last Supper he will kneel and wash his disciples' feet. Mary, the woman, is the first disciple to grasp Jesus' message of humble, life-giving service.

So here we are with Jesus sitting in Bethany, across the Kidron Valley and over the Mount of Olives from the Temple where his death warrant has just been issued. We see two options:

1. The extravagant act of love and devotion of the disciple Mary, the only disciple in the room who will not desert Jesus at the cross and 2. The calculating decision of the chief priest to kill an innocent man in order to maintain an unjust imperial peace. Which is the right path to take? Judas' comments predict the path he will choose.

Jesus was dangerous because he looked through the rules and rituals of the Temple to the ethics that the faith rested upon. In order to maintain their positions of power and privilege, the Temple rulers had to violate the ethics of their faith. They chose death and empire over life and freedom. Jesus points us to another way of life, another way of thinking.

Starting next Sunday, Palm Sunday, we will again watch this conflict between two different ways of life play out as it has every Holy Week for the past two thousand years. But the really important question is how this drama plays out in our life and times the other 51 weeks of the year. Do we choose the risky path of living out our Baptismal covenant: to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self, to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being? Or do we choose the false safety of violating and oppressing

others for our own benefit?

It is an important choice and it is one we make, one way or another, every day of our lives.

Amen.