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Lent 5C
Peace, Seattle
March 17, 2013
Isaiah 43:16-21, Ps 126,
Phil 3:4-14, John 12:1-8

A GOD FOR ALL SEASONS

Some of us live our lives oriented toward the past. We consider that the most important things, the life shaping events, experiences, and relationships we've had—both good and bad—come from that direction, and, for various reasons, it's there that our gazed remains fixed.

Some of us live our lives oriented toward the present. When we awake each morning our agenda is a simple, though not necessarily easy one: to move through the day, responding to whatever comes along as it comes, doing our best to live in the moment.

Some of us live our lives with our face toward the future. The people and places we have yet to see, the things we have yet to accomplish, and hoped-for experiences and dreams orient us toward what lies ahead, giving us purpose and direction.

You might say that the rite of confession and forgiveness, which has been our first act of worship the past five Sundays, provides a way for us both individually and as community, to look in all directions at once:

- To look at the past with honesty, at the present with gratitude, and toward the future with hope—
- placing our trust—one more time—in the God who in Jesus hears, forgives and restores us to himself and to each other, and who opens a path to a future where we are no longer bound by the past.

In all four of our texts this morning there is an interplay between past, present and future.

Isaiah begins by reminding us that our God is a God of liberation—the one who delivered Israel at the Red Sea—and then he goes on to say, ironically: Don't stay focused on the past, I'm about to do a new thing. I've got something else up my sleeve—so get ready for it!

It's as if God is saying: LOOK, YOU'RE RIGHT TO REMEMBER WHAT I DID FOR YOU IN THE PAST, BUT YOU NEED TO KNOW I'M NOT FINISHED YET!

I'M MAKING A PATH TO A NEW BEGINNING FOR YOU, A PATH THAT NATURE ITSELF WILL RECOGNIZE. THAT'S WHO I AM—THAT'S WHAT I DO.

Psalm 126, one of the brief, pithy psalms of ascent, unfolds a similar theme. You helped us in the past, Lord, now do it again—turn our sorrow to laughter, our tears to songs of joy!

And in our Philippians text, Paul begins by rolling out his pedigree:

- circumcised on the 8th day, born to the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews
- under the law, blameless…

And then he puts all of it aside. These credentials, he says, which used to mean everything to me, count for nothing anymore. For my encounter with the risen Christ has reoriented me completely. His cross and resurrection are the gravitational center of my life, and it is this reality that is pulling me inexorably and hopefully into the future.
Past, present, future—do you see the thread?

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We've all had a good dose of past, present, and future intertwining this last week as we've joined the world in witnessing the election of a new Roman Catholic pope. A lot has been made of the fact that Pope Francis is the first Jesuit, the first South American, and the first head of the church to take the name FRANCIS. A lot has been written about what this might mean for the future of the Roman church.

Apparently, Francis tries to practice what he preaches, living a simple life without the frills and perks commonly associated with people in positions of power. And he has a sense of humor. In his dinner with the cardinals after his election he lifted his glass and said: MAY GOD FORGIVE YOU.

People the world over are parsing his every word and gesture, and for good reason. For every move he makes in his new role as pontiff is highly symbolic. We all long for representatives of our faith who, as broken as they (as we) all are, nonetheless strive to have our deeds and actions match that which we hold to be true.

Will Francis be bound to the past? Or will he bring a fresh engagement with present challenges the church faces, and move his people into a future that is consonant with the NEW THING God intends?

Our final text is from John's gospel—the most deeply symbolic account of Christ's life.
And today we walk into a room—into a context—that is rich indeed with symbols; with past events and future realities all converging in the present moment at a meal just days before the passion.

Thanks to Jesus, Mary and Martha had received their brother Lazarus back from beyond death's door, and this dinner for the Master is a gesture of pure devotion. Lazarus himself is the meal's host, and his sisters Martha and Mary are there with him, to serve.

John doesn't tell us what course was being served or what conversations were taking place when Mary came and knelt at the feet of Jesus. But whatever they were, when Mary unstops that bottle of perfume, and the unmistakable fragrance of pure nard fills the room, suddenly you could hear a pin drop.

Mouths stop chewing, conversations halt in mid-sentence, and heads swivel as Mary anoints Jesus' feet and starts wiping them with her hair.

This is a richly sensory story, and as always with John, richly symbolic as well.
The stench of death—so recent at Lazarus' tomb—is supplanted by the aroma of Mary's devotion. What does she know that the others fail to grasp?

According to John it is Judas who voices objection to Mary's act. SUCH A WASTE! He cries.
But I have a feeling everyone in the house that night formed an opinion about what Mary had done.

But the only opinion, finally, that mattered was the one offered by her Lord.
He frames her actions in ways that all of them can understand.

LEAVE HER ALONE, he says. SHE BOUGHT IT FOR THE DAY OF MY BURIAL.

The translation from Greek is a bit awkward here but the point seems to be this:

> Jesus is saying that by keeping the perfume in her possession and using it on him, Mary has achieved a more meaningful purpose that she herself perhaps intended: announcing the nearness of Jesus' death and preparing for his burial.[1]

[1] Matthew Skinner, *Working Preacher* website. The full article can be found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4

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Yes, past, present, and future are all commingled in this story.

Mary's ministry to Jesus confirms her as a true disciple—and anticipates, too, the time soon to come when Jesus himself will stoop to wash the other disciples' feet. From there he will be betrayed by the very one who objected to Mary's extravagant gesture; and will complete his mission by being lifted up on the cross, drawing all the world to himself.

A few weeks ago I attended an Easter Vigil workshop, and central to what the speaker, Patrick Malloy, had to say was in order for our worship to be authentic and not just going through the motions; in order for the Vigil to be deeply true, and not an exercise in denial, our Vigil worship must address not only the BIG DEATH which Christ faced, and which we will all face some day, but the smaller deaths, the little deaths, that populate our days…the experiences of loss in our lives.

"Life-death-resurrection are not sequential," he said, "they are totally interpenetrating."
The stories we tell in the Vigil keep pointing us to the God who leads his people through this process of moving from death to life, death to life, over and over and over again.

There were times, in church history, when it was popular to put baptism off until one was near—or even on—one's death bed! That way, the logic ran, the washing away of sin which baptism effected, would not be overcome by fresh incidences of sinning.

But Brother Martin had a different take. He taught us that while we pass through baptismal waters just once, every day, every time we touch water, we are reminded of our need to turn back to God, turning our lives over to him, putting our trust in him and his promise that no sin on our part, however defined, will finally be able to separate us from the one whose love overcomes every obstacle.

Life-death-resurrection are not sequential. Every day our rhythm in faith is dying and rising, dying and rising.

Whether Mary would have articulated it in those words or not, she was aware of the costly gift Jesus would soon be making. What the others don't yet know, she grasps: that discipleship is about loving Jesus with as much abandon as he loves us.

Let us pray: Lord of life, thank you for loving us so completely that you were willing to offer your life that we might have life to the fullest. Increase our faith in you, so that we will be able to entrust ourselves—past, present and future—wholly into your safekeeping.

May our love for you blossom so fully, that the aroma of our devotion will overflow into acts of loving kindness and faithful service to all who stand in need of love. In your name we pray.