

Death is in the room. That's one of the first things we hear in today's Gospel. Death is in the room. Because six days before Passover, when Jesus is going to be arrested & killed, he's invited for dinner with Mary, Martha and their brother "Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead," (Jn. 12.1). Death is in the room. Not death that was permanent - if we can put it like that - but death that's been reversed. They're not grieving someone they've lost. They're celebrating that Lazarus is alive again.<sup>1</sup> But still, death is in the room. It's there; like a shadow. We could even say that death is one of the guests, in the person of Lazarus, reclining at table with Jesus. Because let's be honest no one can look at him; no one can see Lazarus without also seeing the shadow of death even if, for now, he's been given a kind of temporary "early release."

Some people like to imagine this scene with Lazarus literally leaning on Jesus, since reclining was the common posture for a festive meal (hey, you can eat more if you're already laying on your side). We don't know where Lazarus is reclining, but the image of him leaning on Jesus makes the point about death even more clear. Because if Lazarus is leaning on Jesus then death is literally pressing against him, reclining into Jesus with the weight of his own passion, suffering & crucifixion. Death is in the room.

It's the kind of scene that John's Gospel is especially good at; using simple words & actions to say much more than we notice if we're simply looking on the surface. In just a few short words at the beginning of the story we're told in no uncertain terms that death is in the room. And that's not the only thing. There's also betrayal. Betrayal, in the form of stealing from a common purse. Betrayal in the form of disowning Jesus and handing him

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *John, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Baker Books, 2011), 214.

over for arrest. Betrayal, in the person of Judas, is in the room.

It's a loaded scene. But here's the beautiful thing. In a room brimming with death & betrayal. In the midst of a showdown between darkness and light, John's Gospel wants us to hear this; he wants us to know that death & darkness are not the greatest forces in that room. Because in the midst of death & darkness, sandwiched between betrayal & loss we're told, "the [entire] house was filled with the fragrance of perfume," (Jn. 12.3). In other words, a sweet aroma literally cuts through all the darkness, betrayal, and gloom. It happens in the middle of the story. Mary's anointing is sandwiched between Lazarus and Judas - inserted in the midst of death & betrayal - those two dark forces leaning against her extravagant act of devotion; pressing against it with their full weight. But her focus on the feet of Jesus simply cuts through any darkness in the room.

In the story Mary is highlighting something for all of us that's already true about Jesus whether or not we notice when we're looking on the surface. She's telling us something; showing us the same message we heard in poetry at the very beginning of John's Gospel. In the Prologue John announces, "in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," (Jn. 1:4-5). That's what Mary is showing us with her act of love & devotion.

Surrounded by death & darkness, sandwiched in the middle of betrayal & greed, Mary announces that the life & the love of Jesus are greater than any darkness in the room. And she does it by simply focusing her attention on Jesus' feet.

Today as we near the end of our Lenten journey on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we're

invited to follow Mary's example by focusing our lives on Jesus too. We're invited to do it here, during this small window of opportunity right here at church. We're invited to offer our own extravagant act of love & devotion in the Eucharist. This is our act of Thanksgiving today, sandwiched in the middle of everything else happening in our lives, with all the other pressures or uncertainties of life leaning against us right here in this room, we're invited to focus on the hands & the feet of Jesus; to meet him at table, allowing the same sweet aroma of his light & love to cut through any other darkness, death or gloom. And as we prepare for this loving act of devotion, our other readings offer two pieces of wisdom to focus our affection and point us in the right direction.

The first piece of wisdom comes from the prophet Isaiah. He says, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old," (Is 43:18). In other words, the prophet is telling God's people to *forget everything that God has already done*. On the surface, that's kind of surprising. It's actually shocking. Because it's supposed to work the other way around. Time and again in Hebrew Scripture God's people are commanded to remember God's deeds if they're going strengthen their faith and follow God's ways.

At the Exodus, "Moses said to the people, '*Remember* this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,'" (Ex 13:3). A generation later when they're ready to enter the Promised Land Moses says "*Remember* that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm," (Deut 5:15). When they're entering the land, and they're afraid of armies that are going to fight them, Moses says, "do not be afraid. Just *remember* what the

LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, [what you saw with your eyes], the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which ... your God brought you out. [And here's the kicker. He says,] your God will do the same to all the peoples of whom you are afraid," (Deut 7:18,19). Fourteen times in the book of Deuteronomy, the last great sermon of Moses; fourteen times Moses tells the people: *remember*. If they want to know God, or trust God, or follow God, time & again the message for God's people is always the same: remember, remember, remember.

But today, the prophet Isaiah says the exact opposite. He says, "Do not remember." Because - here's the key - God is about to do something new. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not [see] it?" (Is 43:19). For the prophet, forgetting the past is way of making space for God's future. We forget God's mighty deeds, but we don't forget God himself. God hasn't changed, and even when the prophet describes this "new thing" that God is going to do, he still uses the same language that we heard at the Exodus: "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert," (Isa. 43.19). That's Exodus language. So it's not about forgetting God, it's about not going back to the same well. It's about not simply and always asking for more of the same. "We too often want ...the same from God... But [our] God does not [always] act [the same]."<sup>2</sup> So the prophet says, "Do not remember."

It's hard. It's hard not to remember. Because our memories make us who we are. But sometimes, they can be an obstacle that keeps us from seeing what God is doing now, or who God is inviting us to become (Phil. 3.13). That leads to the second piece of wisdom as

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Getting-Unstuck-John-C-Holbert-03-07-2016?offset=1&max=1>

we learn to focus our attention on Jesus today.

The second piece of wisdom comes from Paul's letter to the Philippians. He says, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss," (Phil 3:7). Isaiah says to forget God's deeds. Paul says to *let go of our own achievements*. Not because our achievements are bad. Not at all. The only problem is that they're not enough. Paul had all kinds of achievements. He rattles off an entire list. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless," (Phil 3:4–6). You don't have to understand all the details. Just know this: it's a sparkling resume.

The only problem, according to Paul, is that it wasn't enough. What Paul describes as a "righteousness of my own," (Phil. 3.9) - his own achievement - wasn't enough if he was interested in knowing "Christ and the power of his resurrection," (Phil. 3:10). The resurrection of Christ defines us, not any of our own achievements. It's a gift. So, what does Paul do? Just like the prophet Isaiah, Paul says, "this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," (Phil 3:13).

Forget everything God has done (from Isaiah). Let go of all our own achievements (from Paul). Those are the pieces of wisdom we hear as we prepare for Eucharist and focus our attention on Jesus. Whatever else is filling our lives today, whatever memory or achievement, whatever darkness or betrayal - our invitation is simply this: forget, let go, focus on the feet of Jesus. And here's the beautiful thing. In the midst of any showdown

between darkness & light, Jesus himself wants us to hear this; he wants us to know that death & darkness are not the greatest forces in our lives. We're invited to know: *in Jesus is life, and his life is the light of all people. His light shines in the darkness & darkness will not overcome it.* Whatever else is filling our lives, whatever memory or achievement, whatever darkness or betrayal, our simple act of devotion today can announce just as powerfully as Mary that the life & the love of Jesus are greater than any other forces in our world. Our extravagant act of devotion - Eucharist (or Thanksgiving) - can become a sweet fragrance that cuts through any darkness in our lives. This extravagant act of devotion, the Eucharist, can fill creation with the fragrance of a sweet perfume. And we do it by simply focusing our attention as we gather for Communion at Jesus' feet. *Amen.*