

March 13, 2016 5th Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

Let us pray...

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ, through our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Trust me, I've heard the jokes and the honest questions about what pastors do between the Sundays.

Besides the meetings, I spend a lot of my time talking with you and with others in our community.

We talk about all sorts of things, some very light, others pretty deep, and quite often I ask questions like how
are you doing? But then we go farther: How is your spirit? Or, where is God in all of this...

In all this busyness, or in the job change, or in the grief, or the illness, or the new relationship, or the dream.

Where is God in all of this? How is your spirit?

Back in October, when I was even newer in this community and when the Vision and Governance Board
met for a retreat, we created three main vision areas, and then some goals to help guide our ministry.

Over these months, on three different Sundays, we're focusing intentionally on these vision areas.

Back in January we began, looking at our connections to the university and the community.

On orange post it notes we named the gifts of our congregation and the gifts of the neighborhood, starting to
fill up the flames over here on the wall.

In May we'll focus on the goal about reinvigorating our ministry with children and youth.

Today, the goal before us is **Igniting Worship and Deepening Spirituality**.

It reads, we will **"Work to create more varied and participatory worship experiences, while honoring
our liturgical Lutheran tradition."**

And, we will **"Encourage greater participation and offer more opportunities to learn, discuss, connect,
share, explore, study the Bible, and express our faith together."**

My questions—How is your spirit? Where is God in all of this? ... They are central.

...They remind us that at our core, we are spirited ones, in relationship with one another and the whole
creation, and in relationship with God, with the Holy Spirit, with Jesus Christ our Savior.

We've got our post it notes ready and today we'll fill up plenty more, but, first, let's look at our scripture.

In the reading from Isaiah, the people—God's community—is scattered, spread out, losing hope, and the
prophet assures them of their history: God has carried you out of slavery before, God will do it again.

Then at the end, God reminds them, really us, that we are created—at our very being—to praise God.

Praise, really, relationship with God, is at our core, our very essence.

Our Gospel this morning, from John begins: “Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus.” That timing is so important.

Did you know that all four gospels tell a similar story of anointing?

Oh, there are differences: names and details are changed, but a similar story, nevertheless.

And all of them but Luke place the story, like John, in the days right before Jesus’ crucifixion.

In John, for Jesus and his friends, Lazarus and Mary and Martha, it’s not only right before Jesus’ crucifixion, but right after Lazarus’ own death and Jesus’ raising of his dear friend—oh, the emotion.

I wonder if this precious nard, that costly, strong smelling perfume, that Mary uses to anoint Jesus’ feet, was actually nard she’d expected to use for the body of her own brother, Lazarus?

It’s such an extravagant act and the pragmatic, utilitarian disciples are up in arms, but Mary gets it, Jesus gets it, Mary knows that this road can only lead to death, and anointing is her praise, it’s her response.

There is something about death.

Oh, I know you could tell me stories. And many of you have: stories of those you’ve loved, stories of those precious, life-up-ending days, when all the usual order and all the usual routines didn’t fit.

Mary wipes her friend and master’s feet with that extravagant nard, and we, too become extravagant.

Our tight schedules, our careful thumb on money, our fleeting attention so often pulled this way and that...

When death nears, heaven and earth come close, and all those rules, and our calendars, and even our sensibilities that usually hold us back, that catch our tongues, that shade our teary eyes...they fade.

I remember years ago as a chaplain at Hennepin County Medical Center walking into one of the intensive care units as a man neared death.

His partner, his beloved, who’d been sitting vigil slipped out and returned with a bag of red rose pedals.

Tears silently running down his face, he covered his lover’s bed with this beautiful blanket of rose pedals.

...One of the most tender, heart wrenching sights I have seen.

There is something about death; Mary is right there, in that moment, full of grief and praise, extravagance.

I am convicted by these passages, for they draw us into something beyond our selves and our routine.

They are about worship, about praise, about our sense of the Spirit and how God is acting and calling.

I don’t expect us to live on that edge all the time, but there is something beautiful in that space, Mary knew it.

Where we can set aside our illusion of control, and abandon ourselves, really, remember who God is....

Where we are pushed to our best values, and we know what is important, and we aren’t afraid to live into it.

Where we utter messy, honest truth, and dare seek and give forgiveness, and extravagant, costly grace.

Where our suffering and the suffering around us focus us on love, on justice, not anger, not bitterness.

Where, really, we meet the crucified and risen Christ again, and we don't leave the same.

That's the edgy, vulnerable space of worship and Spirit: Mary dared go there, and, at our truest, we do too.

Igniting worship and deepening spirituality. Here's what comes to mind for me this week:

This liturgical setting that you created, Gus, that we've used all through Lent with the support of saxophones guitar, cello, it's lovely, it does what our goal invites—it engages us, it honors tradition, it draws us out.

Choir members and Zach, your leadership in singing the spirituals, the deep soulful songs of faith in times of oppression, it is so moving.

These prayers scribed on foot prints, hundreds of them now, up and down, all around, our own labyrinth, they draw us to pray with and for one another, for the world, as we move toward the cross.

Each Wednesday evening this season nearly 50 of us have gathered in the chapel, around the cross, unencumbered by bulletins, to sing, to light candles, to pray—and the experience is profound.

What other opportunity for worship and prayer might this lead us into?

I'm grateful for John Beane who says things like, I want to lead a Bible Study all through Lent!

What other bible studies or small groups might be needed?

How do we strengthen our congregational prayer life by widening what we pray for and changing it up sometimes, too? Praying for other communities of faith? Praying for those in the long months and years of grief after the death of a loved one? Praying as the first step to a new action for justice?

How do poetry and art enhance our worship experience?

I'm grateful for our Seniors Group, who just this week renamed themselves Hope Diamonds:

You together are reshaping the experience and making it work for this time, this group—that is a blessing. Oh, there is more, but this gets us going. Igniting worship and deepening spirituality.

Today as we focus on our vision goals related worship, to spirituality.

I invite you to take some time and consider doing two things—Zach will give us pondering music.

1. You're invited to write on the red post it notes—many of you received them on your bulletin. If not, there are more available. Pens are available, too. I'll tell you the questions in a moment.
2. And also, you're invited to write your prayer concerns or thanksgiving on the foot prints.

As Zach plays, we'll post our red notes on the flames over here AND at the same time place prayers here at our station.

Here are the questions for the red post its:

**Thinking about worship and spirituality, where do you see the Spirit working in our faith community?
And, what would draw you in more deeply?**