

April 3, 2022 5th Sunday after Easter
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126
John 12:1-8

On an Edge

Lavish love, extravagant grace, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

We are on an edge, dear ones, on an edge.

This is the 5th and final Sunday of Lent.

Next week we will wave palm branches and shout our hosannas.

We will read the passion story and enter Holy Week.

We will do our best to follow Jesus to the cross,
to the mystery of God's power.

We are on an edge.

This morning's gospel from John has an edge of its own.

All four of our gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—include a story of anointing

In the other three, it's an unknown woman who anoints Jesus.

But in John's telling, the one we heard today, it's Mary of Bethany who anoints Jesus.

Jesus has gathered with dear friends Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus,
at Lazarus' home, in the village of Bethany.

Not long before, Jesus had shown his power and raised Lazarus from the dead.

Raising Lazarus was pivotal, you know,

for the religious leaders it cemented their call to have Jesus put to death.

They are plotting already.

In a matter of a couple of verses,

Jesus will enter Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna, and Holy Week will unfold.

It's that close.

I can only imagine the emotion of this dinner, this evening:

Lazarus, who had died, is alive, right there, with them at the meal.

Jesus who keeps talking about his own coming death is with them, but barely.

They are on an edge, a holy, sacred, beautiful edge.

Years ago as a chaplain at Hennepin County Medical Center

I remember walking into one of the intensive care units as a man neared death.

His partner, his beloved, who'd been quietly keeping vigil
slipped out and returned with a bag of red rose pedals.
Tears streaming down his face, the man silently, tenderly covered his partner's body and bed,
with a beautiful blanket of sweet pedals.
There is something about death.

I wonder if Mary had intended to use that strong smelling nard for Jesus' burial.

Or maybe for Lazarus'.
We don't know, all we know is Mary stoops, perhaps with tears,
pouring out that lavish perfume,
her hands bathing Jesus' feet with it,
wiping it with her own hair.
I love how embodied this story is.
Mary isn't afraid to use her body to honor Jesus, and she's not afraid of Jesus' body either.

The pragmatic disciples, though, they are up in arms: What about the poor?

But Mary gets it.
Mary knows this road can only lead to death, so she lives in the moment, she honors this edge.
She loves lavishly.
Anointing is her praise, it's her response.
And Jesus gets it.
When he speaks roughly to Judas,
some wonder if Jesus is perhaps referencing an ancient passage from Deuteronomy (Deut. 15:11):
"There will always be poor people in the land, therefore I command you to be openhanded."

There is an openhanded spirit here.

Death brings that—many of you have been there, at the bedside, keeping vigil.
Time shifts, the usual order of the day is lost, routines don't matter quite the same.
Mary blesses 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...
...On this sacred edge, heaven and earth come close.

Today we offer our thanks and our prayers of Godspeed for Pastor Barbara

as she concludes her ministry of care and nurture in this community
and retires from ordained ministry.

Pastor Barbara has been with us on these holy edges.

What a joy it was on Friday evening to gather on Zoom for Barbara's retirement celebration.

There were tears and stories and laughter.

Many of you joined in as did friends and family,

colleagues and congregants from the churches where she's served,
and those communities that have shaped her.

Barbara was a Southeast Minneapolis kid, you know:

spent her childhood and teen years at First Congregational UCC, across the freeway,
went to Marshall High, just across 6th street,
met her love, Swan, working at Gray's Drug Store, in Dinkytown.

Newly married they moved to North Carolina where they became Lutheran and

then to a small mission congregation in Houston, Texas where she felt the tug to ministry.

Then came seminary in St. Paul and time as a student at Grace University Lutheran.

Then calls to churches in Devils Lake, North Dakota, and Willmar
and Grand Junction, Colorado.

Pastor Barbara tells of the day she and Swan moved to North Carolina,

how her grandma kept saying, "They always come back!"

Barbara's grandma was right: They did come back.

They moved back to be closer to family after life changed when Barbara's husband, Swan, had a stroke.

Barbara's beloved Swan died a year ago this past November.

We are blessed for these last 5 years of ministry with Barbara.

As we offer our thanks to Pastor Barbara,

Pastor Maria is just beginning here at Hope.

Next week she'll be with us in worship.

Friends, we prayed for a seamless transition, but I never imagined it could be this smooth.

We thank God, and our call committee,

and we thank the Minneapolis Area Synod and

folks like Bishop's Assistant John Hulden, who is with us today.

The timing has worked well for us, AND it's still an edge.

This edge holds our grief and tears, it holds our fears, our gratitude and hope.

Barbara, you've walked with many in tender times.

We thank you for holding the Christ light for us.

Today we are well aware of this holy edge:

for you as you venture into this new thing called Retirement,
for us because change ... is change.

In Isaiah today we read:

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing."

Barbara, really, all of us: on this edge, God is doing a new thing...

A new thing in you, a new thing in me, a new thing in us, with us.

Let God have their way with you,

God's peace will give you rest,
God's Spirit will renew and surround you,
God's courage and strength will empower you.

In our weariness and despair,

In the world's waring ways,

In the pain and the grief,

God is doing something new.

God is making a way in the wilderness, a river of joy in the desert of our hearts.

God knows the edges, God knows our fear and our need.

And God's lavish love meets us,

God's extravagant grace carries us.

Always and forever more, and right now, right here, today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.