

Sermon: The Way of No Way
Scripture: John 12:1-11
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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There is one central, formative, and guiding story of the Hebrew people and since our religious tradition is the child of Judaism it is also our central story as Christians as well, just told in a different way. And since there is an inherent universality in both Judaism and Christianity despite some claims to the contrary, this story could be considered the very story of the human experience. It's the story of the exodus; the journey of the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, through the birth canal of the Red Sea, into the wilderness and finally after 40 years their encounter with the Holy Land of Israel. Where we are right now at the 5th Sunday of our own sacred season of Lent points to the story of the exodus and the time in the wilderness and the promise of what is to come.

There are many themes that arise from this deep and rich story, but there is one that I think our scriptures for this morning highlight and that I'd like to place with you and that is the theme of a way being made out of what is seemingly no way at all. Isaiah speaks of it as God saying "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." He is writing this at a time in the history of Israel when the people are exiled and experiencing little hope in the future. They have been deported out of the land of Israel and are illegal aliens, foreigners, in the land of Babylon. The poem that expresses their loss of place and loss of purpose comes from Psalm 137:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion...

Our captors smirked a cruel request saying sing for joy,

sing us one of the songs of Zion!

But how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem may my hand forget its skill,

may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth

if I do not remember you

Jerusalem my highest joy."

Isaiah tells them, though, that God is going to make a way for them in the midst of this great exile from their homeland, a way out of what seems to be no way at all. And to do so he uses images from that central formative story that they all new so well but that

seems like ancient history. He reminds them of when their people were in slavery; the archetypal dead-end experience of enslavement where there was no imaginable way out. But God chose the most unlikely person, by the Egyptian name of Moses, to make a way out of this no way dead-end. And so Isaiah speaks for God saying to the people in exile in Babylon – “out of this dead end, I am going to do a new thing, to make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” And because of another most unlikely pagan foreigner, the ruler of Persia at the time, Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylon and then uttered the Edict of Restoration, the Jews returned to Israel. As in Egypt 2 thousand years before, a way had once again been made out of no way at all.

And then about 500-600 years later, we read in the Gospel of John of another prophetic act but this time arising not from a prophet but from a prophetess by the name of Mary (Mary of the “I’ll let Martha cook while I listen to Jesus” fame). I don’t think there is anywhere in the tradition that actually refers to her as a prophetess, but that’s what I’m referring to her as because of her act of prophetic imagination and faith that we read about this morning. Again while Martha’s serving – maybe she’s more at peace with it this time around because we don’t hear about her resenting Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet once again – Mary takes an expensive bottle of oil and anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes his feet with her hair. Wow, what an intimate act, eh? I mean, even in our modern culture it almost makes you blush to think of it, to say nothing of what they must have experienced in that day and age with an unmarried woman doing that to an unmarried man in public. Utterly scandalous! But perfect given the depth and power of what her act was trying to convey.

She was preparing Jesus’ body for burial. She was accepting the fact that he was going to die, foretelling his death, by anointing him. Jesus had told all of them that he was going to Jerusalem to die, but everyone else around Jesus, all of his big strong important male disciples were either overtly resistant to it or utterly in denial of it. Remember when Jesus tells Peter he is going to die Peter says basically, over my dead body, and Jesus says “get behind me Satan!” And there are theories that the reason Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus was because he was a Zealot and the Zealots of Jesus’ time were those who believed that the only way for the Jews to deal with the oppressive Roman occupation of their land was to take up arms and revolt. So when Jesus says that he is going to go to Jerusalem not to kill but to die, Judas feels betrayed and angry which then leads to his willingness to betray Jesus. So in the face of Jesus’ describing what has to

happen, that he must go to Jerusalem and that he will die, all those around him either avoid it or deny it or resist it in one way or another except for one woman by the name of Mary who accepts that Jesus is going to go to die and blesses him by anointing him with oil...

...and the whole house is filled with that aroma and all minds and hearts in that house that night were filled with the aroma of Jesus' impending death, unable to deny it any longer.

And in accepting this reality Mary is proclaiming her faith in a God who makes a way out of no way. Even more archetypal than slavery as the dead end experience in human existence is the reality of death, the apparent end of human existence all together. And yet Jesus has said and is saying that its this way that he must walk, towards death, the ultimate one-way street, the final do-not-pass-GO-do-not-collect-two-hundred-dollars way and it's Mary finally who gives Jesus the great gift of her faith, that she *does* believe what Jesus has promised that somehow, someway, God will once again make a way out of no way at all.

And then as the days unfold we watch just this happen; Jesus enters his own enslavement, his own captors smirking a cruel request to act as King, and Jesus doing all he can to remember the song of Zion as he walks the road towards death... with still the oil of Mary's faithful act upon his feet.

And so how do we anoint and bless the "no way" in our own lives as Mary did? Can we believe that in whatever "no way" situation we find ourselves that God can make a way? And isn't it strange that at times actually the apparent "no ways" in our lives, as much as we might resist them, avoid them, deny them, fight them, become the very entrance to the true way. It's a strange irony but isn't it the truth? If we look closely over the course of our lives at those "no way" times and dead-end places where we felt trapped, enslaved, stuck, dying or dead on some level or another, isn't it true that often through those moments a way was made, there was a certain deliverance out of some Egypt of our lives, a birthing through some Red Sea experience, a honing through some wilderness years and a gift of catching sight of some Promised Land. Can we trust that again and again? Can we claim this most fundamental of stories as our very own? Amen.