

There's No Going Back—Fifth Sunday in Lent

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[Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

[Psalm 126](#)

[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

[John 12:1-8](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

There is a strong theme that runs through our lessons this morning. They are all, in their own way, telling about transformation. Transformation is wonderful and life-giving, of course. But transformation is also mournful and disorienting too. Birth is a transformation. And so is death, also, a kind of transformation. Jesus' anointing at Bethany in John's Gospel means he is on the threshold of an ultimate transformation.

No one seems to understand what is going to happen here, except Mary. Judas—like all of us if we are honest—is worried about efficiency. The cost of the perfume is somewhere near \$40,000 apparently. Judas is painted as a crook, but really, he's just trying to be rational. But none of this is rational. Mary, a friend of Jesus, anoints him for death. She washes his feet with her hair in an act of incredible intimacy and affection.

As you probably know Christ means "the anointed one," which is what Israel called their kings. So here, Christ is "christed"—anointed for his kingship. But not by a renowned man-prophet of old. But by a woman, and no one understands the meaning of the sign as the people of old would have. Here Jesus has to rebuke his closest followers:

Jesus said, "Leave her alone [stop shaming her]. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Jesus is soaked in a beautiful, fragrant oil—a sign of the incredible transformation he is about to undergo. And a sign to us of our transformations as well.

And it's much the same theme in the rest of our lessons. Isaiah and the Psalmist sing of hopeful change to a people shamed and downtrodden:

God says through Isaiah:

**Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;**

**now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me...**

And the Psalmist sings:

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses of the Negeb.

These two lessons, as well as Jesus' anointing, point us to the joy of transformation. A transformation of the whole, of the deserts and the wild things in us and in the world. This is a joy and hope that we *can* be restored, like the Negeb, a dry desert region in the south of Palestine—it is scored with wadis, which are dried out stream-courses, that would seem never to flow, but occasionally run with water after heavy rains. This is a joy that God empowers us to turn away from the sorrow and shame of the past and provides us with a future that will shock and amaze every part of us, even the untamed parts deep within.

But transformation is also hard. New things are... new! They are unfamiliar. **Transformation means there's no going back.**

"Restoration," as the Psalmist says, is not the same as going back in time. This is what Paul writes of in his letter to the church in Philippi. "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." The change that Paul has undergone, is so complete it turned his life upside down, it turned his values upside down, it turned the way he measured success upside down: what used to be his religious resume of honor and belonging, now is a sign of failure. And Jesus, who suffered horribly, who fell and tumbled as low as low can go, even falling into a death by torture, Paul says, in this failure, God has revealed true life. Paul is transformed. Paul is still transforming. He writes that he is: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead..."

As many of you know, my wife Maddy and I are natives of Connecticut. We both have lived all over the place but, speaking of transformation, once COVID hit and we had a child... we felt the call of our home state. So, here we are!

But it's strange being back, things have changed. And God has transformed me so much since I last lived here. My parents live in Middletown. And they watch my daughter Simone on Tuesdays, and on the drive up I let Simone nap in the car. But that often means driving around for a while until she falls asleep, and then driving some more so she has a good nap and isn't a cranky mess for my parents.

On these drives I will often go to my old haunts: the roads I drove on when I was in high school up in Killingworth and Haddam. I was driving up Rt. 81, and I saw they moved the high school in Clinton. There's a Big Y there now. In fact, all the schools seemed to be new and changed and different as I drove. All the restaurants had changed owners and names. Thing after thing was different, and it kind of hits you in the gut. It gave me such a melancholy, lonesome feeling. This feeling I think is what Paul is talking about. This feeling I think is what Mary knew as well, and why she anointed Jesus as she did.

As I was driving, I was thinking about all the times my parents and I would take Rt. 81 to go to the doctor. When I was in Middle School and High School, I was sick with a rare autoimmune blood disease, and my hematologist was in Madison, and 81 was how we would get down to 95. It was just such a shock to think about myself then, so sad and afraid and sick, driving down the very same road.

And then me now, knowing what I know—still sad and afraid sometimes—but... I'm just different. Transformation is hard. Transformation also looks wasteful from the outside. "Isn't God supposed to be more efficient than all this?" says Judas. We might sometimes scream that ourselves to God in the deeps of the night: "God, why did I have to go through all that?"

I know I talk about this all the time, but you all as a merged congregation embody this so completely. You are transformed. There is no going back. It was a wasteful process. When Jesus is anointed today for burial, we all know, at least with our minds, that the outcome of his transformation is life, new and unthinkable life. But the path to that life, Paul makes it clear, is one in which we must give ourselves completely to transformation **as a way of life**.

Paul doesn't say he's got it wrapped up and figured out: He writes... "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

The ultimate change, of course, *is* death. But there are lots of little deaths all around too that transformation presents us with. Merged congregations are a perfect object lesson. But we have been Baptized and beckoned into a whole different, upside-down way. A way of transformation that has been in and around us all along, that we wake up into.

Jesus' anointing with fragrant oil is a sign of his transformation to come. But it is also a sign to us that all of creation is anointed with Christ's life. Transformation and change are built into God's creation. And so today, we ourselves, as a community of believers who are in the throes of transformation, I invite you too to savor and smell the rich oil of anointing around you.

We all share in Christ's "christing" in our baptism. We are a people made, designed, and called to grow and change, and through our openness to God's transformation, we will grow and change our little corner of the world.

Amen.