

5 Lent

April 7, 2019

Rev Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Isaiah 43:16-21

I am about to do a new thing

Philippians 3:4b-14

Nothing that happened in the past can equal what God has done through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

John 12:1-8

Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus' feet

Ruth protected Candace from a tripping fall on a broken sidewalk hidden in the sand. Her elbow took the full force, protecting Candace from the impact of the fall. She had a deep scar for years. What an example of instinct - motivated by love.

My mother, diagnosed in 1974 with breast cancer, went through a series of surgeries; then radiation; then was sent to Roswell Park Memorial in Buffalo. The only hope doctors could give was an experimental surgery to remove her adrenal gland; their belief was that adrenalin helped cancer to grow. I drove from my home in Erie, Pa to Buffalo, and sat with mom as she waited to be taken to surgery. I tried to comfort her, 'you'll be okay, mom.' She said, 'I've had a lot of surgeries. I'm doing this for you kids, not for me.' This is the extravagant love that my mom had for her family.

Extravagant Love shows itself all around us in life; and it transforms life when it happens.

Mary of Bethany was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This was the Lazarus whom Jesus called out from the grave, and gave back his life. Imagine the depth of gratitude that Mary held for Jesus. This is the same Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus when he had visited their home for dinner. She sat and carefully listened to every word he said, while Martha was busy in the kitchen, preparing the meal.

On another visit to their home, just six days before Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover, something motivated her to take a jar of very expensive perfumed ointment, to anoint his feet, and then wipe his feet with her hair. When Judas condemned her for wasting money, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." But how could Mary have known that? His twelve closest friends were not able to understand that Jesus was going to die. It seems more likely that she would be thinking, 'No. I bought it because you were coming and I wanted to give you something special and heartfelt.' She felt so close to Jesus, so grateful that he was her friend, so overwhelmed by his extravagant love for Lazarus, that she simply wanted to show her gratitude. This was the best she had; the best she could do, to somehow respond to the gift of extravagant love she felt from his presence.

The prophet Isaiah knew that God was arranging for Israel's return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. God said, 'I am about to do a new thing.' Their return to the land that had been promised to them by God was proof of God's extravagant love.

Paul said that nothing that happened in the past can equal what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that because of this, his life was transformed. Nothing else mattered to him.

Paul sensed that Jesus has claimed him as his own, and he was filled with GRATITUDE. So all of Paul's energy, every struggle he fought, is because of Jesus' love for him. He was not looking back; he was looking forward... driven by his own personal experience of pure, unexpected, unearned, extravagant love.

In a way I think Lent has a bad reputation; being a time to try one more time to stick to the resolutions we were not able to keep last New Year. This season is not ultimately about remorse or guilt. It is about our finding or re-discovering gratitude for the extravagant love Jesus has for each of us.

Then, next, how will you and I respond to this extravagant love? How does this gift transform us? How can we help this gift thrive, and shine out from us, so that people around us can see it and feel it?

This morning we have the great honor of baptizing Little Bridges Preschool student Liam Lyons. When I met with him and his mother and sponsors, I told them how much I love to celebrate baptisms. Today will be Liam's spiritual birthday. He is being baptized here, but he is being baptized into the community of all Christians everywhere. He is being baptized into a life blessed with God's extravagant love.

When I remember Ruth protecting our daughter Candace, and my mother going into another surgery for our sake, and Jesus going to the cross to express the depth of his love; when I see these signs and examples of extravagant love around me, it transforms me. It gives me hope, and it inspires me to reach higher in my own life.

This theme I am offering you this morning – the reality of God's extravagant love happening all around us - offers to shape and enrich our journey through Palm Sunday and Holy Week. It offers to transform us. Let me close with these words from Paul, taken from the Message Bible; "Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back." Amen.