

Sunday, April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year C)
Philippians 3.4b-14; John 12.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1288392521686283>

(Sermon begins at about 15:45)

“Through Faith in Christ”

On the first Sunday in Lent this year, I preached a sermon that I entitled “Making it Through the Wilderness.” I talked about Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. I went on to talk about how this story and other biblical stories of wilderness experiences provide an image for our own wilderness times: times of being tempted and tested. How our Lenten journey, if anything, is an image for what those times of tempting and testing have been about in our own lives. How our Lenten journey is not so much about the specifics of the temptations, but about our responses to those temptations which may come between us and our relationship with God. That regardless of the specific temptations, Jesus tells us there is a universal response. That we are to recognize our reliance upon God. Because it is in relying on God, in being obedient to God, that we open ourselves to be molded and shaped by God. In so doing, we have the opportunity to live into the fullness of who God creates and calls us to be as his beloved children.

As our Lenten journey nears its end, with Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week just one week from today, these same themes of reliance on God as a means of living into who God has created and calls us to be present themselves anew, in more vivid and poignant ways.

We start off with our Epistle reading. Writing to the church in Philippi 20 to 30 years after Christ’s death and resurrection, Paul seeks to convey his personal understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. At this point, the early church is struggling with how to live into being followers of Christ. Paul lifts himself up as an example of just how to do this, but in a way that might be a little unexpected to his audience: the original recipients of his letter, as well as those of us who hear his words today.

Paul starts off talking about all those things that we typically think of as being important to our identity: our credentials, our qualifications, how we have benefited from circumstances of birth, and what we have accomplished to get where we are now. Despite having quite the respectable resumé, he goes on by saying, “Yet, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Phil 3.7). In other words, “all that other stuff . . . its meaningless. That is not who I am.” That the important thing is not our nation, our family ties, our education, the church we go to, the job we have, or the things we have accomplished. That we cannot rely on those things. That they are meaningless in the grand scheme of things. No, the important thing, that which truly defines who we are, is our relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. Paul presents himself as a model of faithful living based on this alone. No longer relying on his status and credentials but relying solely on who he is by virtue of his faith.

Paul goes on to characterize the true source of his faith in an interesting way. A way that, as is so often the case, gets lost in translation. Paul states that his identity comes “through faith in Christ.” Those four simple words—“through faith in Christ”—or rather the original Greek Paul used, can be translated in two ways. It can be understood as “through faith in Christ . . . emphasizing the human response to God’s act in Christ, or ‘through the faith [or faithfulness] of Christ, emphasizing the faithful obedience of Christ in which one can participate and to which one must conform, but not by sheer human effort.”¹

In other words, this one phrase—“through faith in Christ”—in Paul’s original writing carries a dual meaning. That we must have faith in Christ and in what he has accomplished for us through his death and resurrection—which we will be commemorating in the coming weeks. While our having faith in Christ is the only thing that we can actually control, Paul is saying that is only part of what it takes. The other part—perhaps the greater part—is Christ’s own act of faith in what he was called to, in what he actually accomplished, through his death and resurrection. That first Christ had to agree to participate in the events of his Passion that would set in motion a chain of events that would result in the defeating of sin and death, that would result in our salvation. As if Jesus himself was taking a huge leap of faith on our behalf when he agreed to this seemingly insane plan involving his own death as a means of defeating sin and death. That Jesus himself had to have faith in what he was doing. Or rather, that he had to have faith in what God was planning to do through him. No matter how risky. No matter the cost to himself. And that he was willing to act on faith for us. Out of love for us.

It is this model of Christ’s faith that Paul cites as the model for his own faith. As Paul says, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3.12b). And this is the ultimate model for all of us in our lives of faith. We see this more fully in our Gospel reading for today. A bringing together of Jesus’ own faith, of his reliance on God, with the faith and reliance of those who follow him. In this case, represented by one woman.

Today’s reading from the Gospel according to John takes place a mere six days before the Passover. Just one day before Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now know as Palm Sunday. Jesus is at the home of his friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, in Bethany. This is the final stop on a journey that has spanned a lifetime. This is, undoubtedly, a farewell dinner given in his honor. A farewell dinner as Jesus prepares for the final leg of his journey from Bethany to Jerusalem. A physical distance of just two miles. One that any of those present—that most of us—could walk in the matter of an hour. And yet, a span that none of us could journey without Jesus forging the way. His two-mile journey that will lead him to his destiny. The journey that will forge the way to our destiny.

As the evening’s festivities proceed, Mary engages in a seemingly strange and certainly extravagant act. She uses incredibly expensive perfume to anoint Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. An intimate yet solemn action that seeks to express what words cannot. Recognition that Jesus’ time is short. That his death is imminent and inevitable. Expression of the grief and sorrow at what will happen in a few days’ time. And perhaps, also an expression of gratitude for a beautiful friendship, for the lessons learned from her Master. For the way her life and the lives of all those present have been changed through their relationships with Jesus.

Her actions call to mind other times she has sat at Jesus' feet, hearing his parables and teachings. Witnessing his acts of love and kindness. Perceiving the gravity of this night, of what will happen in the coming week, Mary takes the lessons of love she has learned and demonstrates them in one final act of love and compassion for her Lord.

Unbeknownst to those present, Mary's actions will find a parallel in Jesus' actions at the Passover meal on Maundy Thursday, when he will wash the disciples' feet and wipe them with a towel tied around his waist. Mary's actions foreshadowing the anointing of his crucified body as it is taken from the cross and prepared for burial in the tomb on Good Friday. Acts of love for the one who will perform the ultimate act of love and compassion for her and all humanity through his death and resurrection.

Jesus obviously recognizes full well what is going on in Mary's actions. What they signify. The sacramental nature of this extravagant anointing. How this action transcends time, linking the present moment to the Passover meal that will occur in six days' time and to the day after that, to what we call Good Friday, and beyond. It is impossible to imagine the thoughts that were running through his mind. The feelings that were ripping at his heart. Even now, was he gripped with the thoughts and feelings he will have in the Garden of Gethsemane in just six nights? How could he not be?

And yet, his fortitude, his resolve is clear. As Judas, the one who would betray him, even now betrays his own true colors by seeking to dampen this sacramental, transcendent moment. Ostensibly objecting out of concern for the poor, while actually operating out of personal greed. Jesus, matter-of-factly responding, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (Jn 12.7). A somber recognition that, no matter his personal feelings, this was his destiny. That there was no turning back. A firm statement of his faith, of his unwavering reliance on his Father to sustain him through the coming week.

In so doing, Jesus also lifts up Mary as an exemplar of faith, of what it means to follow him. Like him, Mary is also able to set aside her own feelings about what was to happen. Rather than seek to deny the inevitable, she embraces the reality, recognizing that this is what Jesus was called to do. In her own way, she is relying on God to help her get through this painful night. To do this, she takes what she has learned from Jesus about love and compassion and tenderly does what she can, even if only in a small way, to make this moment more bearable for him. No matter how much it is ripping her apart inside. Because this is what it means to be his disciple. To support and to follow her Lord, no matter what, even to the end.

In our readings for today, we see profound examples of faith. Profound examples of reliance on God to sustain us in our lives of faith. We certainly see this in the faith of Christ, as he prepares for his Passion. We see this in Mary, as we witness her selfless act to prepare Jesus for this eventuality. And we see this in Paul, who draws on the faith of Christ as the example for his own faith journey. Lifting it up as the example for our own faith journeys. As we, in the words of Paul, "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3.14). The prize that will be fully revealed on Easter.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2104 (emphasis mine).