

Homily for Lent V, Cycle C
March 21, 2010

Andrea M. Johnson

Is God's Good News Our Good News?

This time last year, I was busy, -- very busy, fulfilling a requirement for my Master of Divinity degree. I was serving as a chaplain intern at Sinai Hospital in northwest Baltimore. I was called upon to spend many hours listening to the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows of a whole panoply of patients and their families. Sometimes, I would pray with them; other times, laugh with them, cry with them, or simply just **BE** with them. *Many* was the time that I felt that there wasn't much I could do for them. That made me sad, and sometimes frustrated. It also challenged me to think long and hard -- about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, -- to be a person of hope.

One day early on, I walked into the room of a 35-year-old patient I'll call Mr. P. I was totally unprepared for what I encountered. As I entered Mr. P.'s room, there was terror in his eyes. His thin, wasted frame twisted and writhed in his bed, and he began to howl and to moan. My heart rose to my throat, but I managed to tell him my name, and that I was there to visit him from Pastoral Care. I told him how sorry I was that he was in so much pain, and that I would try to find his nurse and ask her to help him. He couldn't speak, but his eyes pleaded with me to hurry. I went to the nurses' station and found his nurse. Shaken, I pulled Mr. P.'s chart which indicated that he had had a stroke, and was in acute renal failure. His prognosis was very poor.

I felt helpless, and therefore, useless to him. I was angry that a thirty-five-year-old was dying prematurely, and in such an awful way. I imagined that Mr. P. knew he was dying, and that that knowledge, along with the pain, had him terrified. I thought of my own children in their thirties, and I wanted to scream, "Where are you, God?" And then, I remembered -- I remembered that what it was all about was being a disciple of Jesus -- someone who is a person of hope -- a person who models that hope.

So, what does any of this have to do with today's scripture passages and what they have to say in our lives?

In today's passage from Isaiah 43, the prophet exhorts the people to look beyond the abysmal circumstances in which they find themselves at that moment. Look, he says. Can't you see it? God is doing something new. The deck may seem stacked, but God is making a way through for the people he has formed for himself! Isaiah raises the very memory of the Exodus, an image of hope and of victory, for a people seemingly without hope of ever again living in freedom.

The twelfth chapter of John's gospel, of course, depicts the very eve of Christ's passion. Jesus is visiting with his dear friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary at Bethany, just days before going up to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. He and his disciples are sharing a special meal with them. Suddenly, Mary does something rather bizarre. She breaks a jar of extremely expensive perfumed oil, and anoints the feet of Jesus with it, and dries his feet with her hair. People around her are astounded by her action. It seemed terribly extravagant to do such a thing. And why *would* she do it? What did she mean by it? Even though the gospel writer explains Judas' motive for criticizing Mary as greed on his own part, **in fact, Judas gives voice to what probably many were thinking when he remonstrated that this was a waste.** Many would still say so today! But maybe Mary knew *exactly* what she was doing? She wasn't just honoring Jesus as their great Teacher (although that could be one explanation for such a gesture). After all, Jesus has already indicated at least three times in various gospel accounts that he is to suffer and die, and be raised from the dead. People didn't really want to hear it! Today, we would say they were in denial. Kind of like me in Mr. P.'s hospital room! The 64,000 dollar question is: **Is God's good news our good news?** Are we people who live by hope? Or are we people who live by optimism with expectations based on probability?

It is my opinion that, in this story, Mary is the *only* one who really gets it. Mary seems to be the one disciple who says by her action, "Okay. You say you are going to die, but that all shall be well. I'm choosing to be a person of hope. I am choosing to believe you. I am choosing to believe **IN** you! I am anointing you for your burial, but I am also anointing you as the One *God* has chosen and anointed, -- because of your faithfulness, -- to lead us through the *new* Red Sea, to lead us in the *new* Exodus that God has prepared for us. Mary is the one disciple who seems to understand that God, through Jesus' death and resurrection, is indeed about to do something new. God is about to do something as outrageous and extravagant as her own symbolic action. By the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, God is doing something unimaginable, something that **loves us into learning the real meaning of hope** in the suffering of the now.

Our commission as followers of Jesus is to live and act in hope, to make God's reign present, to live the message of salvation in the here and now. As we continue this journey with Jesus toward Golgotha, let our eyes be opened and our hearts, like Mary's, be prepared to know an incomprehensible suffering. We do so, not in vain or in some benighted exercise in masochism, but so that we may better minister to one another as a resurrection people. If we cannot minister in the midst of death, in the midst of suffering and uncertainty, then we cannot adequately know or share the joy of resurrection. Let us strive to be the Marys of today's world, seeking out those who suffer, as well as dealing with our own tragic experiences, prepared to have our eyes opened, our hearts broken, and our lives changed as we walk together.

Amen.