

Sermon for 3 April 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126 (UM847); Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

"A larger story"

In this global survey of our inner life known as Lent, we arrive today at a shift out of ourselves and into the life of creation itself.

Look @ the Bible readings and see what I mean. The Hebrew Bible has the prophet Isaiah quoting God, saying, "I am about to do a new thing." Then the psalmist, speaking for the God of Israel, insists this is not just our story, but everybody's. Then Paul, writing to his beloved Philippians, says any plans we have, any pedigree, any connection whatever, is minor compared to what's about to happen in Christ.

Then the Gospel of John turns our retreat away from ourselves, and even from all other matters, to an announcement of what will happen to Jesus.

This is where we'll stay for the next two weeks.

Led here by Jesus himself, as he responds to a woman's dramatic gesture, we are invited to spend the coming weeks meditating not on ourselves, but on him.

Maybe that's not the right way to put it. Always, we are to focus on ourselves. All the great religious traditions insist on this. If we're not willing to look at our motives, and to be honest about our history ... both what we've done, and what was done to us ... we are not fulfilling our purpose as humans. What we do then ... or rather, how we do that after serious study, and with the help of friends and loved ones .. people we trust, and in many cases, people we go to for particular insight about ourselves, whether it's for medicine, or spiritual insight, or any other assistance in growing up and expanding our talents as fully as possible ... is to identify with Jesus as he completes his own story.

Our work will get intense in these next two weeks. The church tells a powerful story. It will be easy to sit back and listen to what happened to Jesus and let it go at that. Lord knows the church is good at that. Just this past week we've been schooled in how Christians have done all sorts of things to separate themselves from Jesus. The Episcopal Church has come forward with a program of reparations that literally has church budgets ... church members' pocketbooks ... confessing common bondage to slavery, and the obligation to do something literal and practical to make amends for that. The Pope has gone to the Vatican, I believe it is, to condemn his own predecessors' guilt in telling European explorers they might do whatever

seemed best to them to overwhelm indigenous people for the benefit of the more powerful Europeans. The church in Canada has heard horrible stories of native children's separation from their families, their punishment for native customs ... again, Francis has been blunt about pedophilia among the clergy in extremely open declarations ... and he has spoken against Russian's invasion of Ukraine. Along with these examples, we have daily evidence in our own politics of efforts to deprive people of access to voting, and to allow even more access to guns, and on and on ... as though all these and many more examples do not attach to our own obligation to imitate Jesus as he spoke and acted against the abuses of his time and place, to the point of dying for his outspokenness.

This, then, is what lies immediately ahead if we are going to stick with this retreat to its conclusion, through Palm-Passion Sunday, through Holy Thursday and Good Friday, and into the high moments of Easter morning. The Swiss preacher Karl Barth, who helped German Christians resist Hitler, spoke of history's centering down into a funnel-like moment in Jesus, where all the vast history before and all the unseen expanse of the future were passed through the moment of Jesus of Nazareth, and what was one story before became a new story afterwards....

We are part of a larger story, even as we become more honest and open about our own personal stories on this retreat every year. We've got fresh knowledge. We know more bad news about ourselves this year than we've ever faced before. That is the glory of this moment, seen in fellowship with Jesus and his risen body, to which we belong. Let us proceed to claim our family ties through the rest of the world and the history of God's activity from the start.

Amen.