5th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 4.3.22

Isaiah 43:16-21
Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 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, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8
Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (301)

There's something embarrassing about smell. It's so intimate, and indiscriminate. You have to be there to perceive it. You have to be close, present—which is its only boundary. Proximity, smell's ephemeral realm.

But there's always the risk of embarrassment, even shame, in being so close.

William Carlos Williams wrote of it (comically, thank goodness):

> Oh strong-ridged and deeply hollowed
> nose of mine! what will you not be smelling?
> What tactless asses we are, you and I, boney nose,
> always indiscriminate, always unashamed,
> and now it is the souring flowers of the bedraggled
> poplars: a festering pulp on the wet earth
> beneath them. With what deep thirst
> we quicken our desires
> to that rank odor of a passing springtime!
> Can you not be decent? Can you not reserve your ardors
> for something less unlovely? What girl will care
> for us, do you think, if we continue in these ways?
> Must you taste everything? Must you know everything?
> Must you have a part in everything?

See, if you're close, you can't stop your smelling—neither perceiving nor even producing smell, which is its own embarrassment, and which is why (I suppose) we have perfumes and colognes. I guess we'd rather spread forth a pleasant smell we've chosen over a pungent smell we haven't chosen, this which we simply produce for having bodies and then simply spread forth into the world around us without our wanting to, without our *knowing* it.

But if you're not close, it's almost impossible to call it mind. Words won't do it: no description of a smell will much mimic the experience of smelling it. Images won't usually do it: no picture of a thing that smells will produce the feeling of smelling it. I suppose it can be replicated: scented candles will try to replicate the smell of the beach, the smell of sun-dried laundry, the smell of apples, the small of pine. Few manage to do it. I have a vanilla candle that always calls to mind baking cookies. I have a pine scented candle I only burn around Christmas because it puts me in mind of Christmas things. Most others only smell like themselves, the smell of the candle called "Clean Laundry," the smell of the candle called "Sandy Beach."

A song that was popular several years ago goes like this:

> Sometimes a certain smell will
> Take me back to when I was young
> How come I'm never able to identify
> Where it's coming from?
> I'd make a candle out of it
> If I ever found it
> Try to sell it, never sell out of it
> I'd probably only sell one
> It'd be to my brother, cause we have the same nose
> Same clothes, home grown
> A stone's throw from a creek we used to roam
> But it would remind us of when
> Nothing really mattered
> Out of student loans and tree house homes
> We all would take the latter

A secret world for the two people who would recognize that unknown and long-lost smell. Such intimacy.

We're six days before the Passover here, which according to the Gospel of John means six days before the crucifixion. We're getting close. We're getting dreadfully close.

We're also in the Gospel of John, which means we're in the 5th Sunday of Lent.

Since John is not a synoptic gospel, which is to say John's gospel isn't a synopsis of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, it doesn't read out as a chronological account. This means it doesn't

map onto a church year as easily as Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. John's narrative force is less chronological, more theological, which makes it perfect for being dropped into the church year here and there, a deepening or enriching as needed.

The fifth Sunday of Lent always has us in the Gospel of John, as we get close, gravely close.

As of now in the story, we're six days before the Passover, which is to say six days before the crucifixion, and Jesus had come to Bethany, the house of Martha and Mary, these two now familiar sisters, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had six days earlier raised from the dead.

This had been the final sign, and the greatest sign, in this book of signs as to who Jesus is and what he was about in the world.

John's gospel is largely about signs, what we might otherwise call miracles, but which John is always careful to call signs. This, to remind us that they aren't a thing unto themselves, important in their own right, but are a signaling of something far more important, that is, who Jesus is and what he was about in the world, which was this: he was about completing his Father's work in the world. He was about perfecting the Father's work of creating the world—because the creation, according to John, wasn't yet complete, not until the crucifixion, this sign of the power of love, this moment when Jesus uttered from the cross, "It is finished."

"What is finished?" we might often have wondered whenever we heard Jesus say this from the cross. Dying, he might have meant his life was finished—a logical thing to think. Or he might have meant his dying was finished, now as he breathed his last—another logical thing to think. But John's gospel's logic is less about what makes sense to us and more about what makes sense for God and this world, the *logos*. It's more theological; it's more Christological.

"It is finished," meant that God's creation is finished, is now complete. In the crucifixion, the ultimate pouring out of God's power in self-giving, sacrificial love, the creation is complete. God has overcome death, this thing that was interwoven into the creation. God has now moved from life to life, and the whole creation would now follow.

We are still amidst the following. We are yet moving from life to life.

It's always important to remember that, in the Gospel of John, we begin in the beginning. John begins his gospel narrative with words that are to recall the first words of Genesis, these by which the Bible begins, and by which all creation is imagined to have begun, John so begins his gospel narrative: "In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

But unlike those early words of Genesis, John's gospel doesn't confess that the creation has come to completion. Genesis, of course, does: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." But in John's gospel there is work yet to be done, which Jesus often claims about himself to be doing, that he has come to do his Father's work in the world, he has come to work the Father's works.

It's for this reason of not yet being complete that there is still suffering, there is still sin. See, the problem that's afoot in the creation isn't because things were once perfect but now they've suffered a fall or a break. It's that things have not yet become perfect, which is to say complete or finished, that they are yet in the process of perfection or completion. And this means our task as people who aim to live in Christ isn't to get back to when things were perfect, back to before things got bad. Our task is to move into a future faithful that Christ, whose work is complete, leads us into that perfect completion, work that is now ours to do though it is also determined in being done.

Ours is not to make things good again, ours is to live into a good future of perfection and glory, to realize and manifest such things as we go.

See, in John's gospel, we are yet in the 6th day.

As now, on this day, six days before the Passover, when Jesus had come to Bethany and was at the house of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, this final sign of what Jesus was about in the world: life.

But that final sign had alerted the authorities once and for all about how dangerous Jesus was, attracting such devotion while also upsetting the very most fundamental ways of the world.

It was this final sign that had sealed the deal. The authorities would seek Jesus out to arrest him and to have him killed, which Jesus himself seemed to know would be the case. It's why he wept at Lazarus' grave just before making him rise: "Lazarus, come out." He wept because he knew Lazarus alive would mean Jesus dead—and yet he must make Lazarus alive, which would be bring about his own death.

And now here he was on the last 6th day we would hear about in John's gospel.

Martha was preparing dinner. And Mary took a pound of costly perfume, worth today about $650, and anointed Jesus' feet with it.

Her worship of him had practical effect. To oil someone's feet in the dry climate of the Middle East was to relieve them of real pain, I'm sure. Cracked feet for someone whose walking was his way was, I imagine, a constant pain.

It also had symbolic effect, which is always the level on which we should read the Gospel of John. This isn't a book to be read literally—as none of the things it accounts for operate on just one level of meaning. There is always subtext. There is always a higher level of meaning. Here, Mary's worship of Jesus was meant to inspire the worship of Jesus down the ages, down the ages.

It's what makes Judas' admonition of her extravagance all the more a false dichotomy, as if he were really concerned about the poor. The irony here is that there has hardly been a force in the world more advocating for the poor than the Church. The irony is that to worship Jesus is to live so even the poor stand a chance. It is to live in full knowledge that the poor don't deserve it, that they, like everyone, are bound for glory and are rightful heirs to that inheritance that should take effect even now. Grinding poverty is a gross injustice in a world abounding with creative life. The Church knows this. Its worship of Jesus holds us to this knowledge. No other social force has ever had such a clear seeing of this.

So, it's a false dichotomy Judas has set up here: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" Which is why Jesus is quick to admonish him: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Take this moment, it's as if he's saying.

Take this moment.

So let's take it.

The fragrance of the nard filled the house.

I don't know what nard smells like. I've never smelled it. It's rare and expensive even now. And even if I had ever smelled it, I'd hardly be able to recreate that experience now for you to share in. That's how smell is: you had to be there. Which makes this moment between Mary and Jesus, and the house that had become the ephemeral realm of this fragrance, exclusive, just for them.

There's not much of scent in the gospel narratives—and maybe for the very reason that evoking smell through narrative is impossible. Only mentioned twice in all four gospels, the scent of the events is the least evoked sense. There's seeing. There's hearing. There's touch and taste. There is much of all the sensory experience, but of smell. Only twice, which means we ought to take notice.

Both times are in these last few events of the Gospel of John. Lazarus: when he had died and had been in his tomb for four days, the sisters warned Jesus there would be a stench. Jesus: when he was going to die and would be in the tomb in but six days, Mary made it so there was a fragrance, anointing for death so a far more pleasing scent.

The contrast must certainly mean something, don't you think?

If so, what?

Jesus' death would be a horror, a stripping away to some ghastly truth about life and the world. It would also be a flowering, an unleashing of an unstoppable force: love, prefect and complete love. This death would not be the sort that bears a stench, the utter humiliation of what was once alive. It would be a death that is its opposite: a pouring forth of something pleasing which never gives out, never gives up, only ever gives and gives and gives. Life whose sustaining force is life. Love whose only reason and logic are itself: love. Something sweet and delightful which cannot be overcome but rather overcomes everything grave and foreboding of this world, the world is finished and made complete in this constant pouring out.

The Church is to live into that perfection. The Church is to live out that perfection. The end is now, and it is a good and glorious end, and it is ours to live out even in these weeks moving into Easter.

Next time you smell something sweet, let all this come to mind.

Thanks be to God.