



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, APRIL 7, 2019
ISAIAH 43:16-21; PSALM 126; PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14; JOHN 12:1-8

A TECHNIQUE OF AWARENESS



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."*]

Barry Lopez is known as our nation's "premier nature writer." He has a profound gift for capturing the sacred meaning of "place" and experience while inviting us to

travel along with him. I've been reading his 1998 memoir, *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*, in which he shares the story about a cross-country trip he once

took, from his home in western Oregon, to visit a friend in South Bend, Indiana.

He avoids the interstates, choosing instead the rambling mesh of state roads where he can attend more presently to the landscape across which he travels. He begins the essay recollecting his trip with these words:

He begins the short story with these words: “A few miles east of home in the Cascades I slow down and pull over for two raccoons, sprawled still as stones in the road. I carry them to the side and lay them in sun-shot, windblown grass in the barrow pit. In eastern Oregon, on US 20, black-tailed jackrabbits lie like welts of sod...[in Idaho] a crumpled adolescent porcupine leers up almost maniacally over its blood-flecked teeth. I carry each one away from the pavement into a cover of grass or brush out of decency, I think. And worry. Who are these animals, their light gone out? What journeys have fallen apart here?”

At one point a man asks him the question not yet formed on my lips but clearly stirring in my heart of hurried distraction. Why do you bother, he asked And Lopez answers him and his audience standing in the shadows: “You never know.... The ones you give some semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, may have been like seers in a parallel culture. It is an act of respect, a technique of awareness.”

He plods cross-country in staccato fashion, stopping for brief moments of silent respect and earthy rites for birds, mammals, even insects resting lifeless in the sill of a motel room window, until finally amid the chorus of cicadas singing love songs at dusk in the trees lining his friend’s driveway, he steps from his car a final time bearing “a sorrow over the world’s dark hunger,” to be greeted by his friend who invites him inside, and into “the powerful antidote of [human] conversation” and “the forgiving embrace of the rational.”ⁱ

When I read that short story, I thought, Wow, that’ll preach. Of course, it’s a Lenten story, morbid yet beautiful, a technique of awareness for our Lenten journey.

This Fifth Sunday in Lent was, until a half century ago, known as Passion Sunday, a fortnight from Easter when we began a two-week intensive encounter with the death of Jesus. We now collapse that into one week, holding next week’s Palm Sunday as Passion Sunday, too, striking a cadence that will carry us breathless to the cross, before leaning three days later by the opening of an empty tomb.

We no longer hear the Passion Gospel today, but we see it foreshadowed in the passage we just heard, or should I say we smell it foreshadowed in the nard-filled air.

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, at a place called Bethany, Jesus enters a friend’s home,

with heart heavy in sorrow for the world's dark hunger, and he hungry for the powerful antidote of human conversation as he ponders the weight he wished would fall away.

He is there with his friends, including Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. The stench of death was still in the air of a candlelit room, though none spoke of it. A fetid odor that hangs heavy, lifeless in the stale air. Was it Lazarus still, having been dead four days before being unbound and let go to live once more? Or was it hanging heavy on Jesus already, limpid notes of what was to soon come?

The men around him were unsure or unaware, too busy shoring up their kingdoms of fear and self-preservation., frantically plotting a different course than the one Jesus was contemplating.

There was nervous chatter about the risk that Jesus would take, going to Jerusalem. This would be his last Sabbath meal. In six days-time, he would be arrested, whipped, pierced and crucified by the powers of rational contempt. He was a dead man walking.

The men around him did not know this, of course, and so they press on in their meal, but Mary knew—Mary, the sister with whom Jesus wept in the road where she met him to share the news of her brother's death.

Mary knows, having been already to the parallel culture of Lazarus' death, and brought back. Now a seer who knows. Who knows death when she sees it. Knows death when she smells it. Knows what is about to happen to Jesus on the road to Golgotha.

In this moment she sees no need to maintain the semblance of boundaries her station as a Middle Eastern woman would otherwise demand. She and Jesus share an intimacy that transcends even death now, and nothing will ever be the same.

So she retrieves the clay jar and breaks its neck, releasing the smell of spikenard, a sharp scent with notes of mint and ginseng.ⁱⁱ

The thing about odors is that one odor does not replace the other; they only contrast, only compete, intermingled on the wafts of air, lighting side by side on our olfactory bulbs to fire competing neurons by which we know what that smell is. Vladimir Nabokov once wrote: "Smells are surer than sight or sound to make your heartstrings crack."ⁱⁱⁱ Mary knows this, too, as she releases the burial balm into the room.

She has no need for words in this moment, no need to live life any longer denying the reality of death—any death—and so she releases her hair in a scandalous act of intimacy brought on by the stench of death, and rubs the oily nard into Jesus' dry, dusty feet. Surely, she mingles more tears there, too, before using

the silken strands of her black hair to wipe away any residue. Scandalous, my friends, scandalous in its excess, its extravagance.

It was an act of respect, a technique of awareness.

Someone protests, but Jesus says leave her alone. Mary is a prophet from some parallel culture, where the value of the nard is inconsequential to the economy of God's mercy made manifest in this man who would soon die.

ⁱ Lopez, Barry. "Apologia" in *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*, Knopf: 1998, pg. 113-118

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a beautiful description of the scene by Barbara Brown Taylor http://day1.org/1760-the_prophet_mary

And we are left standing in the shadows of a candlelit room, onlookers treated to the holy moment, the silent ritual, as we prepare in our own right to follow Jesus into Jerusalem, to the place where death and life stand still for three days, fetid odor in the air, mingled now with the piercing aroma of pure nard, all so that we may splint our weak knees and make the journey that will take us to the backroads of crucified life, and beyond, yea, even unto Easter.

Will you go?

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited by Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4554> who unfurls this line of thought about smell in her essay.



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