

Do You Not Perceive It?

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Texts: Isaiah 43: 16-21, John 12: 1-8

Good morning, church. It's so good to be with you on this chilly, rainy morning, whether you're here in person or worshipping online, as we continue walk along this Lenten road together, seeking wellsprings in the wilderness. Today, we encounter a reading from Isaiah that was one of the sources of this theme for Lent. Listen again: "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." Man, do we need those words of assurance right now as we find ourselves facing all that we are facing. God is about to do a new thing.

I told my husband, Aram, that we were going to read this Isaiah passage together today, and he told me about a Christian rap and rock band that was a particular favorite of his growing up – DC Talk – and their song that goes, "I know God's doing it. God is doing a new thing." Don't worry, I won't make us sing it call and response, but if you need a little earworm reminder of this passage that will be stuck with you throughout this next week, you're welcome. This passage is catchy. It's compelling. And it's so full of hope.

As I was preparing to preach this week, walking with these texts, going to sleep with them, thinking about them over breakfast, as I do, this one line from this Isaiah passage kept calling to me. God says, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?" Do you not perceive it? Today, I want us to reflect together, in conversation with these texts, on the power of our attention in wilderness times.

I know I am not alone in feeling that my attention is fractured and scattered and diffuse these days. There is so much coming at us all at once, and it all feels so big and like it needs such urgent response. It's like there are pockets of fire everywhere, and there's no way we can put them all out. Each day on the way to work I open my podcast app, some part of me wanting to know what's going on and another part of me resistant to it, knowing that it will pull me into that day's dose of existential dread or overwhelm. Can anyone relate? And for many of us, it's not news about other people – it's the overwhelm of our own lives. War in our home countries. Our immigrant families fearing deportation and torture. Questions about whether our trans children will be able to continue to receive life- giving healthcare. Our plans for retirement feeling shaky at best these days.

It is a LOT. And when our attention is pulled in so many directions, the urgency of the world calling to us so fiercely from so many corners, it can be easy to miss the ways that God is doing a new thing. Even now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?

I want to bring us to our Gospel story now, because I think it has something beautiful and interesting to say about attention. In this story from John, we meet Jesus on the verge of his entry into Jerusalem, in the town of Bethany, which is on the outskirts of the city. Everyone is preparing for Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and Jesus and his disciples stay the night with the family of Lazarus, whom he had recently raised from the dead. The mood around is jubilant, but Mary, Lazarus's sister, senses what is to come, and moves to anoint Jesus's body for burial. There is such tenderness in this scene, such intimacy: she kneels at his feet, and takes a whole pound of perfumed nard, bathing it over his feet and then wiping them with her hair. Mourning and love and devotion and honor, and the tenderness of taking another's feet, the most beat-up parts of their body in those times of dirty, rocky roads and sandals, and holding them, anointing them, with love.

And Judas is having none of it. Maybe he's jealous; maybe he's in denial about the Jesus' forthcoming death in which he will play a part. But his critique makes sense to me – he sees Mary taking this costly, luxurious substance, and using it to anoint Jesus' feet, and he says, “why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” I understand his misgivings. Jesus' ministry has been centered on those most marginalized, reminding the world of the holiness and belovedness of every human life, and on upending a system that allows there to be poverty in the first place. How, then, could Jesus accept this gesture of extravagance, when so many people are still poor?

Jesus responds with what I hear as a reprimand, “you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” This can be confusing: does Jesus believe in the intractability of poverty? Isn't the whole point of Jesus' ministry to upend the world so that it's more aligned with God's kingdom, God's justice? What are we to make of this response?

Some scholars suggest that this Gospel story is best read alongside a passage from Deuteronomy 15, in the Hebrew Bible, that Jesus would have known well, because it recounts some of the teachings that God passed

directly to Moses. In short, the passage says, “do not be hard- hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.” Whatever it may be. Sometimes the neighbor’s need is for money, and sometimes it is for a quality of our presence – God calls us to live our lives open-handed and open-hearted to all of it. Jesus’ response is a reminder to Judas that God invites us to be in a life-long posture of adaptable generosity, responding to needs that are not categorical and abstract, but intimate and personal. Mary lavishes her love and her full attention on Jesus – on the need that she sees in front of her. A man, walking towards death though others may be unaware or in denial, in need of strength and extravagant love.

And indeed, that is how Jesus lived out his ministry of justice and world-upending love. He centered the poor and the marginalized, and he did it with his hands and his eyes, person by person, loving touch by loving touch, loaf by hungry mouth, story by story. His prayer was for systemic transformation, and his ministry was person by person – loving and healing through his focused presence and attention.

No doubt Jesus also had moments where his attention was pulled in many directions, from the micro to the macro, especially as he approached his death. And so it is especially moving to read the story of Mary, Lazarus’s sister, returning to him the abundant love and healing attention that he had lavished on so many others throughout his ministry. With her hands and her hair and the gift of precious perfumed ointment, she focuses her attention fully on him, and her love gives him the strength to walk forward into death. He walks into Jerusalem the next day, people laying down palms and shouting Hosanna! And within a few days, at his final meal, he kneels at his disciples’ feet and washes each of them, even Judas, with the same tenderness and attention that Mary had shown to him.

Another very special Mary, albeit one who lived much later, the poet Mary Oliver, wrote once that “attention is the beginning of devotion.” Attention is the beginning of devotion. Paying close and undivided attention, giving the gift of our full attention, engenders devotion to what we are attending to. Where we place and focus our attention matters. When our attention is scattered, pulled in too many urgent directions, our devotion is diluted. And as our Gospel story shows us, when we attend to need abstractly and categorically, like Judas, we miss out on devotion, too.

Instead, this story reminds us to attend wholeheartedly to the needs we can see and touch, to the beloveds around us, to the particular person in front of us, to the tree and plant beings who are even now bursting forth with life – to attend to them with the lavish love and attention that engenders devotion. And just as Mary’s undivided attention and devotion lend Jesus the courage to walk into Jerusalem and toward his death, when we are on purpose with our attention, we can glimpse the ways that God is doing a new thing, and our devotion gives us courage to be part of that new thing.

Now – I want to be clear, this mandate to get specific with our attention and devotion does not mean we bypass the pain of the world, ignore the headlines, float above it all. Or that we forget or give up on a prayer and commitment to systemic transformation. That is the opposite of what Mary is doing here with Jesus. She sees the brutality and challenge of what is to come, and she pours out her heart to it in love. Her devotional attention on Jesus contains a clear-eyed reckoning with the pain and injustice of the world, not as an abstraction, as Judas would have it, but as a living, breathing beloved child of God right in front of her, someone whose feet she can anoint with love before he walks into the hands of the empire.

I think here of the folks who lived for years in the treetops of California’s redwoods to prevent logging companies from clear-cutting. They were rooted in a deeper prayer for right relationship with the earth, for which they were willing to lay down their lives, but their attention was anything but categorical or abstract: it was specific and devotional – they lived in the trees they sought to protect, they knew them with their hands and feet, they loved them and called them by name. Attention is the beginning of devotion, and devotion is the seed of courage.

Our attention economy seeks to dilute and splinter our attention, to overwhelm us or numb us. The good news of the Gospel today is that we have a chance to practice a revolutionary kind of specific, devotional attention every day, with whoever is in front of us. We practice it when we spend time in the kitchen, layering a lasagna with care so that we can deliver a hot meal to Friday Café. We practice it when we learn the name of the unhoused neighbor on the street whom we pass each day, when we begin to build relationship with them. We practice it when we dare to share something vulnerable with a friend and they stay with us in it. We practice it when we show up to GBIO meetings, building trust with those we’re sitting next to, building collective courage. We practice it when we join with

thousands of others, as many of us did yesterday, to call the world we need into being, for our friends, for our neighbors, for ourselves, for our children, even when it's not easy – one of my favorite signs, which I glimpsed from within a pressing crowd of many people, said, “it's so bad that even the introverts are out here!”

I've been practicing that kind of devotional attention each morning, just for five minutes, listening to the mourning doves returning, watching the magnolias begin to ease their way out of their fuzzy encasements, feeling this little one kick inside of me and the wonder of her becoming. Some call it a sit spot, but you can call it whatever you want – a chance to guide your attention to linger on the world that you can see, touch, smell, hear, a way to rescue your attention from scattering and return it to its natural role as lover and protector of life.

Attention is the beginning of devotion. “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.” Our job is to stay awake to where God is doing a new thing – to practice saying, “yes, we perceive it!” – so that we can be God's collaborators, so that, like Mary in our story, like Jesus, we can let our attention bloom into devotion and our devotion blossom into courage: courage to walk forward, courage to protect life, courage to pour out our love extravagantly, courage to face death, courage to fight back, courage to imagine. Amen.