

“The smell of Good News”

- Hamburgers on the grill...
 - How many of you just smelled it? Oh yeah, and it smells better when it's charcoal burning
 - What about church incense?
 - Love it or hate it, I bet you were able to almost perceive it.
 - I can be standing in the processional line just talking away, but when that smell reaches me, it centers me
 - It brings me back to why I am here, why we are here
 - I've joked around with acolytes and choirs alike, that it smells like God
 - Ok last one: the smell of a copy machine.
 - I've heard speculation that it is Ozone, but I am not sure
 - We could go on...
 - Scent, or smell, is a very powerful thing to me- it almost interrupts the other senses and cannot be ignored
 - And as research suggests I am not the only one here¹, to activate memories almost like no other sense we have
 - Maybe in part due to our brain's anatomy
 - But this week, it was the smell of a spring rain that triggered some memories, and signaled the change in the seasons.
 - I had an overnight trip to Boston this week for a rector's installation service- I pulled a round trip in almost 24 hours! I don't recommend it
 - The weather was a bit warmer there, and it rained
 - That wonderful clean, fresh smell filled the air, and announced spring was coming!
 - Never mind the show yesterday!
 - It is no accident that you and I are also over half way through our Lenten journey and fast this year as well
 - We are nearing a liturgical transition that will take us through the dark of the tomb and into the light of Easter
 - Not unlike the plans that “die” in the winter and return in the spring.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-babble/201501/smells-ring-bells-how-smell-triggers-memories-and-emotions>

- Our prayers, readings, all of our liturgical resources are beginning to prepare us for the coming Easter
- Transitions seem to be the theme of the week, and I believe it is ever present in our readings this morning as well.
- With smell having such a powerful affect on us, had we been there that day with Jesus in today's Gospel...
 - It would have been the smell of perfume that made the day one we could never forget
 - As we hear this passage, right away we have our hint of transitions to come, John says, "Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany."
 - As the timing suggests, it will be 6 days from now that Jesus shares the Last Supper with his disciples, celebrating the Passover
 - Followed very soon by his crucifixion
 - This is Jesus' last stop on that symbolic "road to Jerusalem"
 - And he stops at the house of some of his closest friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha
 - Of course they are among his biggest supporters, his most loyal and passionate disciples
 - How could they not be? They witnessed their brother Lazarus brought back from the dead!
 - This is Jesus' last chance to gather his strength, his endurance, his courage before the time of trial
 - We get a glimpse of just how much Jesus means to this family through the actions of Mary
 - Much like the record in Luke's gospel, here in John Martha is serving, and Mary's full attention is on Jesus
 - If they were living today, we might say they have different love languages... or ways of showing their devotion to Jesus
 - Martha is the host- feeding and taking care of her guests
 - Mary had a different way of showing love: she gave him a gift
 - She takes a pound expensive perfume, the thick kind that does not wash off with water, it's lard, oily
 - That is a whole lot of perfume, even today. A little goes a long way.
 - This pound is worth three hundred denarii
 - A denarii was a day's wage, so roughly a year's wages ²
 - And she pours it out, anoints Jesus' feet of all things, and wiped them with her hair

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent5c>

- There is a level of intimacy between them here that no doubt bordered on the inappropriate in this time and place
- John records that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
- Back in the south, when it gets really hot during the summer months, we had a saying: “the speed of smell.” (you’ve heard that?)
 - But for us, it was a real, tangible thing
 - A person would come to church- especially in old ones without air conditioners- and sit a few pews away
 - And you could count the seconds before the wall of smell from the perfume or cologne hit you
- Everyone in that house had the wall of smell hit them- odor stinging in their nostrils, and locking it in their memories for ever
- It was also the intentional foreshadowing to the anointing of a dead body for burial
- Judas was also quite uncomfortable
 - He objects, I bet he is feeling the tension in the room, the awkwardness of Mary and Jesus interacting very intimately. Almost too intimately.
 - Perhaps he is jealous that Mary seems to have a closer connection with his teacher than he does- a little sexism
 - Maybe he is already planning to betray Jesus.
 - He also realizes that the perfume is very valuable.
 - So he objects to it all, and sets up a false dichotomy here of helping the poor on one hand, and worshipping and giving to Christ on the other
 - As if they are in competition... which is untrue
 - Our duty is to do both, they are both good things, to help the poor, and to further God’s kingdom and work in the world
 - Jesus however sees what is really going on, sees Judas’s jealous heart
 - Jesus repeats a saying, that the Poor are always with you, but you do not always have me.
 - We must be careful taking this out of context... it is almost essential for preachers everywhere to take a second with this
 - I have personally had another Christian tell me that this is justification for not helping the poor,
 - Because we can never eliminate poverty, so we are off the hook to try
 - That is simply an unfaithful reading
 - Jesus is not telling us to give up on helping the poor, or that it is not urgent
 - Instead Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 15:7, a teaching they would all be very familiar with

- Where God tells Israel to help the poor
 - In fact, God makes it very plain to Israel that if they see a person in need they are most certainly supposed to help
 - God goes on to say, since there will always be need on earth, Israel should always be ready to open their hand to the needy
 - Because there will always be need, we should always be ready to help
- So Jesus is not changing the rules.. instead Jesus responds directly, and personally, to Judas.
- Quotes the first part of a teaching from the Pentateuch, which everyone there knew was really a rebuke
- John gives us some insight and says that Judas was a thief, so we can conclude that he has actually been siphoning money off the top
 - And instead of helping the poor, has been helping his poor self.
- Poverty will always be there as long as Judas and people like him refuse to help, and take money for their own gain
- Jesus is saying, the poor will always be with YOU, Judas, because you do not help them, so they remain in need
- And! Jesus says, “but you do not always have me.”
- You see, Judas has not only helped ensure that the poor will always be there,
- But he will go on to help ensure that Jesus will not, by betraying him
- In one final nuance of Jesus’ response here, according to the Talmud, or Jewish civil law
- The care of the dead is praised even above almsgiving³
- You see, Mary is foreshadowing Jesus’s death in just a few days, and in her own way is fulfilling that law.
- And here they all are, packed into the house
 - Trying not to be embarrassed at the seeing the physical intimacy between Mary and Jesus
 - Witnessing Jesus take down Judas with the truth right there in front of everybody
 - Everyone is a little on edge
 - And this intense, overwhelming fragrance that has notes of sweetness, death, and change hanging in the air
 - It is times like this that I believe Jesus pulled from his own faith tradition for comfort and support
 - He knew what was coming, he knew he would die soon, they were already out to get him, and it was only a matter of time

³ *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary New Testament Set*, Westminster John Knox Press, Digital version, Commentary on John 12:1-11

- Perhaps Jesus is drawing on his own faith tradition, remembering passages like the one we use heard in Isaiah
- Where God tells the people, “I am about to do a new thing”
- In this passage, Isaiah writes to the people of Israel as they are well into their exile
- Nearing the end of it, as we know from history, but to them it sure seemed endless
- At this low point, God promises to do a great new thing, a new thing that will make previous experiences of God’s salvation pale in comparison
- At this low point for the people in the room, they too were about to see an act of salvation like none before
- Perhaps this morning our best approach to this text is to take a deep breath, allow our own sense of smell and memory to help us
 - To bring us into the room with Jesus and his closest friends
 - Can you smell the perfume?
 - Perhaps we too are smelling the fragrance of change in our lives and the world around us
- Maybe we are like Lazarus, Mary and Martha- high on our mountain top of recent awareness of God in our lives
 - Lazarus was dead, and is returned- how much rejoicing they must have done
 - So much that like Mary, we are in whole-hearted with God and ready pour out all that we have at God’s feet
- Perhaps we are like the disciples- concerned for a friend who is beginning a time of trial, is acting strangely
 - Who like Jesus, is staring into the unknown, and all you can do is be there, bear witness, and support them
- Do we happen to see some of ourselves in Judas here, growing a little bitter with how things are going, and where they are going
 - Taking cheap shots that only increases the distance we feel
 - In need of a warming of the heart, in need of something to hope for
- As Jesus and his disciples prepare for the week to come, as we prepare for our Holy Week
- And as we consider our own lives and the changes that are in them
- Because there is so much change around us these days.
- So much uncertainty and a future that is very hard to see, and a past that is no longer with us.
- Let us hear the good news of God, proclaimed in Isaiah, and lived out in the life of Jesus
- That God is now working on a new thing.

- It now springs forth, do you not perceive it?
- That God is there at each point in our lives working to make a way of hope
- As the fragrance of change enters the air, we know that God is there just as strongly and pervasively.
- Rejoicing with us, mourning with us, loving us, and making a new way.
- There is the smell of good news in the air today.

Amen.