### “Leave Her Alone” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 3, 2022

**Isaiah 43:16–21**

16 Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 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. 20 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, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

**John 12:1–8**

1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary 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. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” . . . 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

This season, spring, is well known for its weather surprises, sometimes sending us good warm days, other times chilly and wintery days. In a similar way, the passage from Isaiah is letting us know that we can be ready for God’s surprises, but these are *good* surprises.

The Isaiah passage is a little mysterious. It seems to be saying that God will do unexpected things, and do *new* things, like making a path in the sea, like making the chariots and warriors of the world lie down and become powerless, or making rivers flow in the wilderness, or making animals bow down and worship. But it’s really for “the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise” (43:21).

He seems to be saying that God will go to any lengths to get his people to love him, because they instead tend to turn away from him. That’s what he says in the verses that follow. So I think this is like a literary experiment by God to get his people to listen to him. It might imply that there are great changes that God’s going to start making in the world, but that’s less certain. They may just be examples of what God *could* do, to try to reach his people. The promise of God making the desert bloom, however, is a promise that occurs elsewhere here in Second Isaiah (51:3).

Second Isaiah is the name scholars give to the author of chapters 40 through 55 of Isaiah. Second Isaiah lived in Babylon during the Babylonian Captivity, and offered words of hope and encouragement to the exiles. Two chapters earlier, he had said “I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive” (41:18–19). So that seems to be a promise that Second Isaiah intends to be taken literally (see also 35:1, 6, in First Isaiah). This is not only a promise of water, but of the growth of fragrant and productive trees.

Now let’s look at the gospel passage and see where that leads us. It tells the story of Jesus’ friend, Mary. This is neither his mother nor Mary Magdalene, but a long-time friend, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who are important characters in other stories. In this one, Mary has bought some expensive perfume and she applies it to Jesus’ feet, rubbing it off with her hair. Judas makes a self-righteous comment. Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? The implication is: “why is this foolish woman making such a display? Why didn’t she sell this expensive perfume?”

Jesus’ reply is swift and stern. “Leave her alone.” Notice that first. He defends her against the bullying criticism. Jesus does not let bullies, even religious bullies, get their way. “Leave her alone,” he says, “She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial” (12:7). In other words, she is showing respect for me, and is also anticipating that I may die soon. What she is doing is respectful and honorable. Don’t attack her for this. You won’t always have me with you. It’s alright to appreciate me while I’m still here. The poor you always have with you, and you can serve them at any time. Nothing is to stop you from serving the poor. But if she wants to show respect to me, let her do so.

Mary was not only a friend of Jesus’, but a believer. She is the one who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:39), while her sister Martha was busy in the kitchen, and was complaining to Jesus about Mary not helping. This earned Martha a rebuke, with Jesus saying “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42).

With her act of anointing Jesus’ feet, she has once again chosen the better part, and Jesus will not see that taken away from her.

The main connection I see between these two scriptures is fragrance, and both have something to say about the future. Second Isaiah promises a blossoming of fragrant trees in the desert. Mary pours a fragrant perfume on Jesus’ feet. One of the metaphors for spiritual living is fragrance. Kindness leaves a kind of spiritual fragrance in its wake. The abundant love of God will create aromatic trees where there is currently only arid sand. The love and devotion of Mary bestow fragrance upon Jesus.

The nard that Mary used is believed to come from either the honeysuckle or the related valerian family; it grew in India and Nepal, and was exported to other cultures. Regarding spiritual fragrance, the Buddhist figure named Chanakya said “The fragrance of flowers spreads only in the direction of the wind. But the goodness of a person spreads in all directions” (<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/chanakya_201071>).

We need to cherish love whenever we see it. Judas’s mistake was to sneer at Mary’s act of love. He should have recognized it as an important action. Mark’s version of this event has Jesus saying “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (14:9). And indeed we do!

In conclusion, I want to link this sweet story to the promise in Isaiah that God will make water to spring up in the desert, leading to the growth of fragrant trees. What God touches becomes fragrant. Godly love expressed itself through Mary’s act, honoring Jesus and anticipating his death. It was an act of honor, and not to be disrespected. May our lives be fragrant with goodness and respect for that which needs to be respected. Being a spiritual light involves being selfless about it, as St. Teresa said about her writing, “This does not come from me since there would be no foundation for it, unless the Lord gave it to me” (*The Wisdom of Teresa of Avila*, 30). It flows out from an abundant heart. Your cup runs over (Ps 23:5). The mystic Franҫois Fenelon said “may we not only pray, and teach, and suffer, but eat, drink, and converse—do all things, with reference to his will” (*Selections from Fenelon*, 280). Luke comments on the spiritual fragrance of young Jesus when he says he “increased . . . in divine and human favor” (2:52). St. Francis had a spiritual energy that attracted others. He drew up a rule for his followers based entirely on the teachings of Jesus.

Paul says that, “through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing [Christ]. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved” (2 Cor 2:14–15). You can be the aroma of Christ, if you are grateful, gracious, and poised. You affect people as you pass by, if you carry the aroma of Christ. Do all things with reference to his will.