### “Something New” Steve Finlan for The First Church, April 6, 2025

**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**

Six 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?” 6. . . 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.”

I don’t know about you, but I have a taste for both familiarity and newness. When I go to a restaurant, I sometimes want to order something I’ve had before and I know I’ll like, but just as often I want to order something I’ve never had before. I like to try something new.

When you come to church, maybe you want to hear familiar hymns and hear a familiar and uplifting message. But maybe you occasionally want to hear something a little different, unexpected. I hope you have an openness to something new, because that’s the theme of today’s sermon.

Isaiah has a message that asks the Jews to be ready for a new thing that God will do. In fact, he tells them “do not remember the former things” (43:18). God is going to do a new thing, and wants them to be ready for it. Maybe some of what he will do is to make the warrior, the chariot, and the horse to lie down, and be unable to rise and make war (43:17). *That* would be surprising.

In the next story, Judas’s complaint seems reasonable. Why not spend the money for the poor? But Jesus points out that the poor you always have with you, and you can serve them at any time, whereas the Son of Man is only present with them for a short time, and his death is coming soon. Mary should be allowed to honor the special person in their midst and to cherish his presence before his departure. Mary was particularly devoted to Jesus’ teaching. She is the one who was rebuked by Martha for sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to him instead of helping Martha in the kitchen, which earned Martha a mild rebuke by Jesus, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing; Mary has chosen the better part” (Luke 10:40–42).

Here, Mary has chosen the better part again, honoring Jesus before his death. And again, someone wants to rebuke her for what she is doing. Jesus defends her against this bullying, saying “leave her alone!” (John 12:7). Have you noticed how often Jesus defends people? He defended and uplifted the despised tax collector, Zacchaeus, saying “he too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). He defended and healed the blind man who was begging for his attention, with the apostles telling the blind man to be quiet (Luke 18:38–42). He defended the children who came to him, when the apostles were speaking sternly to them (Mark 10:13–16). He complimented the faith of a Roman centurion and of a Syro-phoenician woman (Matt 8:10; Mark 7:29).

Jesus stands permanently against bullying. He is the uplifter of the downcast, the empowerer of the distraught. The power that Jesus exercises is not power *over* but always power *with*; he wants people to find life—and life abundant (John 10:10).

And this *is* something new. Instead of a severe and judgmental God, he taught and he displayed the compassion and understanding of God. He taught that people could *decide* to do, and then *do*,the will of God (Mark 3:35). It was a new message. Bring not to mind the old message, but hear this new message about God’s love and about human cooperation with God. It is like water after a long dry season in the wilderness, like good news and a blessing after a long period of feeling blamed and unworthy. It’s like hearing God say “leave her alone” after one has been criticized and shushed for years. With the message of God’s love, we have a new thing, a new way of living and thriving.

There was a woman who went to a lecture that had a religious subject. She was hoping to hear something new and interesting, and not the same-old message about sin and punishment that she was used to hearing. Indeed, the speaker said that people are not inherently evil, that there was no big sin-debt that somebody had to pay, that Jesus honored those who have “an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15), which means there really *are* people who have an honest and good heart! And finally, that what God wants is to see people grow spiritually. The woman was filled with joy and approached the speaker, eventually making him into a friend whom she invited to her 90th birthday party.

Forget all notions that imagine God to be a bully. Forget all the old ways that believe in force or coercion. God doesn’t use those things. God *draws* us through his love. He wants us to understand his kindly nature, and to voluntarily cooperate with it. If we know the truth we will be drawn to God. “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matt 11:15). Anyone who *can* hear him will receive what he is giving. And Jesus has faith in *us*, in our ability to “hear.” So *hear* the new message of love. And get in synch with it, so that *you* practice love in your life.