

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
April 3, 2022

We held a funeral here at St. Mark's two weeks ago. We don't host weddings or baptisms during the season of Lent, but funerals, as you can imagine, we celebrate whenever needed.

Lent, as you probably know, is the season 40 days before Easter. And it is a season in the church of special attention to the cross of Jesus. It is a stark season, devoid of frills. To mark Lent visually, the church is spare. No gold cloth. No altar flowers. No overflowing baptismal font. Just as the Israelites wandered in the desert for a while before reaching the promised land, so we too wander a bit during these 40 days.

But here is the catch: when we celebrate a funeral, the church teaches that that day is a little bit of Easter. We say the word Alleluia, which is forbidden during Lent. We bring out all the flowers and candles and talk about angels and saints singing around the throne of God. As you can imagine, that is quite a costume change for a church to go through. Celebratory funeral on a Saturday. Solemn Lenten observance on a Sunday. It gives one a bit of spiritual whiplash to move from the penitent rites of Lent into the sublime celebration of a life well-lived in the great love of God.

And I get that same sense of spiritual whiplash when I read the gospel story for today. In it, Mary—sister of Martha and Lazarus and close companion to Jesus – takes a jar of costly oil and covers Jesus' feet with it, while using her hair to cleanse and perfume his feet. But she chooses to anoint his feet when they all know that his ministry is coming to an end. At a time of great sadness, she chooses to lean into a lavish expression of love. To be a little bit luxurious. To ignore some of the practical considerations of the other disciples and instead to make a big, beautiful gesture.

And, isn't that what a funeral is in our church? A big beautiful gesture? And isn't that what our coming Easter celebrations will be? A big beautiful gesture?

There is an old hymn that asks the question, "how can I keep from singing?" And I have always loved that question. I think about those violinists in the subways of Kyiv in Ukraine, playing nightly concerts amid the thunder of bombs overhead. I think about the way we laid Bob Kreuziger to rest with a lavish celebration, even though it was the middle of Lent and his family was struck by the grief of losing a beloved father. I think about the ways in which people use humor and laughter, even in the midst of the pain of daily life.

Mary is our leader in this. She shows us this morning that life requires some beauty and some richness to combat the cruelties of the world. I think that beauty is an act of resistance. And I think that Mary's act was God's grace personified. I think every time we dance or sing in the face of adversity, we are channeling a little bit of Mary.

And, as with Mary, there will be critics. The other disciples were cruel to her. People around us will say that we shouldn't celebrate when things are hard. Or that we shouldn't make art or music when there are more practical considerations that require urgent attention. But the truth is that those considerations will always be with us. There will always be work needed to do justice, work needed to alleviate suffering, work needed to atone for our individual and our corporate sins. But a life of only atonement is not really a life worth living. And Mary knew that. She knew that sometimes you need to break out the good china. Sometimes you need to put flowers on the table as an act of defiance in the middle of war or pandemic. Sometimes you need to skip your homework and write a song, start a romance, walk through a forest, feel sand on your feet.

There is plenty of death in this world. Mary knew that. She knew her friend Jesus was marching slowly to the cross. But she still went out and got costly perfume to anoint his feet. She knew that moment with Jesus would never come again and that sometimes moments need to be experienced lavishly. Just like we do at a funeral. And, hopefully, just like you do every now and again. I know this is sort of a strange message to hear from the pulpit, but I wonder if you can think of the last time you did something lavish simply for beauty's sake? I think that this sort of richness—a gorgeous meal or an afternoon playing hooky with friends – can serve as a tangible mark of God's love and a reminder of the goodness of creation even when the facts don't seem to support that.

I know that it is Lent. I know that we are in a bleak landscape and in the middle of a fast. But I think that even deserts have flowers. Even fasts have sunrises and sunsets. The goodness of God's lavish grace simply cannot be contained. Remember Mary, at the feet of Jesus, pouring out expensive perfume because life is precious. Amen.